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Purple Rain

Music video comes of age

by Jon Lewis

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MUSIC VIDEO/MUSIC BUSINESS

PURPLE RAIN begins with a long, visually dazzling, performance-format music video, "Let's Go Crazy." The song is one of Prince's most familiar numbers, and it immediately signals a connection between the character, the Kid, and Prince, the star who plays the Kid. Indeed, the movies advertising campaign makes that connection. "Before he wrote the songs, he lived them." Most important, this opening sequence shows an obvious indebtedness to the form and iconography of music video. PURPLE RAIN adheres to the stylistic flourishes of music video and thus is immediately eye-catching. Correspondingly, it also uses the less-than-savory narrative and moral underpinnings of the new music video form, so it treads on tender ethical ground.

By beginning with "Let's Go Crazy," the film takes on a range of important issues. In the opening number, the Kid and Prince, the music video real-life star, become almost synonymous. We know that the film's character, the Kid, is destined to become a star like Prince, that his songs will be hits, and that he is standing in for "Prince in the lean years" still singing for a wage at the 1st Avenue 7th Street Entry, the famed club that played a role in Prince's rise fame.

The film's dazzling visuals connect with music video in general and specifically with the "Let's Go Crazy" tv video. Albert Magnoli, the film's director, co-scenarist, and editor, successfully raises the nineteen- to twenty-five-inch image esthetic to the large screen. He discovered that music video *looks good* in 35mm. Also, in the film's narrative construction, he uses ongoing references to performance-style music videos to maintain the obvious substitution of the Kid for Prince. Magnoli is the first 35mm filmmaker to exploit music video both stylistically and narratively to such great effect. This is an essential characteristic of PURPLE RAIN and a main reason why the film is so good and so popular.

The TV music video of "Let's Go Crazy" differs from the film's opening, though both adhere to a performance format as opposed to a "story" format, and both share much of the same "live" footage. The PURPLE RAIN version of "Let's Go Crazy" offers a rather conventional movie musical premise. It introduces the supporting cast as supporting of and being secondary to the star. It also quickly characterizes the milieu. Finally, it refers to the rags-to-riches story so common to movie musicals, with the Kid standing in for the archetypal chorus-line dancer awaiting his date with destiny.

The TV music video of "Let's Go Crazy" includes some of the more stylized choreography of the film's second number, performed by Morris Day and the Time. Despite the different footage, both video and film version identify Prince as an important performer. The TV version also advertises the film and injects selected clips from later moments in the film. Since "Let's Go Crazy" is aired often on television, it offers a new and free form of motion picture advertising (that is, if MTV etc. are not asking for under-the-table payola). It's a strategy PURPLE RAIN shares most obviously with GHOSTBUSTERS.

Both PURPLE RAIN and GHOSTBUSTERS, especially at this writing, share a common distribution scheme. In many locations these popular youth target-audience films were held over through the summer and well into the fall. This "long run" strategy becomes supported by the audience's familiarity with the films, songs and stars. Thus, when we see "Let's Go Crazy" or "When the Doves Cry," we are reminded of a film we've either already seen or should feel left out if we've missed it so far. The trailer-cum-music video participates in the long-run distribution strategy. The video asks the viewer to see the film again and again. For this reason, PURPLE RAIN can sustain a four-month holdover — especially because the studio need not depend on a long running TV trailer-ad. In the case of PURPLE RAIN and GHOSTBUSTERS, the music video advertisements are free, or maybe they're paid for surreptitiously by the record companies.

CHARISMA/DIFFERENCE

The Kid differs from his audience, his band and his family. Early on, his dress and his penchant for self-expression, both as a male and as a black, articulate his separation from the other characters. At home he is a spectator to his father's brutality; his powerlessness within the family further alienates him. But his role as a troubled, out-of-place, out-of-step youth also corresponds to his inevitable success as a male, rock-and-roll music-video star. The difference between the Kid and those who follow him is that he is charismatic and they are not.

The Kid also has little to do with the day-to-day business of making music. He lives only for performance, where he is in control, undeniably male, sexually aroused and sexually arousing. He cannot relate to his parents, lover (the ever-loyal Appolonia), band (whom he exploits and behaves rudely towards except on stage), or club owner. The opening

performance video sequence shows him as very different from his primary local competitor, Morris Day: a silly, stereotypical (fancy dressing, fast talking, horny) Motown-style singer-performer. Day will plot to undermine the Kid's career through slanderous remarks to the club owner and by setting up a "girls group" to unseat Prince's group, the Revolution. During this, the Kid remains reticent, except when it comes to Appolonia, and endures Day's underhanded tactics. Prince seems to feel self-contained enough to depend on his charisma to succeed on a far larger scale than Morris Day and the Time.

The Kid seems incapable of attending meetings and rehearsals or doing a professional set. Such behavior further mythologizes his self-centeredness. Ultimately he need not be an "organizational man" because he is elite. Separated from the rest of mass society, the Kid can vent narcissistic and sadistic tendencies. And given that he is in the United States, such behavior seems irrelevant because of his success.

MUSIC VIDEO/WOMEN IN THE GARBAGE BIN

Despite or because of its young target audience, PURPLE RAIN and music video in general depend greatly on striking visual style and stunning male performers. Women are (so clearly it's silly to argue this) rendered as willing objects of the male performer's gaze and song and sexual interest. As such, women are used as the ultimate supporting players. Music video often makes them into adoring, dedicated, loyal fans rendered senseless by the magic of the dynamic male performer. Despite her desire to achieve professional status as a singer on her own, Appolonia must accept her supportive role. This is not because she is untalented but because she is a woman in a man's music video.

An early scene in PURPLE RAIN establishes a difference between male and female performers. Morris' girls group rehearses dance steps before an all-male band and a rather ruffled would-be promoter, the comical Mr. Day. Morris abuses the women verbally and does not let them sing. He asks them to "sex-up" their dancing and then exits forlorn as he regrets their lack of talent and reluctance to listen to him and his own inability to have been able to unseat the Kid at the club. On the street he and Jerome (his bodyguard) are accosted by a spurned woman, whom Jerome disposes of in an alley trash container. This action is supposed to elicit a comic effect.

This scene is match cut to a central romantic confrontation between the Kid and Appolonia in front of a music store. As he stares into the window (at his reflection or at a white guitar), she asks, "Do you see anything you like?" She refers to herself. When he responds yes, he clearly does not mean her. In this, their second "meeting," the Kid affirms his self-love and his male (phallic) object love. Though we do not yet know it, he is opening up the avenue for his exploitation of her and his soon-to-be indulged sadistic impulses.

MOTORCYCLES/MUSIC VIDEO

The Kid's motorcycle establishes another reference to the music video formula. In *PURPLE RAIN*, motorcycle footage provides a logical and visually interesting accompaniment to the music. It alludes to previous films targeted at the youth market (*EASY RIDER* most obviously). And it refers to the masculine rite of the bike between the legs, something the Kid mentions specifically later on in the film.

The first motorcycle sequence has Appolonia shed her leather togs and dive into freezing water in a "ritual" for love and success. The Kid insists on this purification but only to play a joke at her expense. Appolonia's enthusiasm for success is matched in the film by the trait of sexual "over-eagerness." Seemingly, women's professional and sexual ambition bring out the worst in the Kid and establish the moments when we will see him vent his rage.

After Appolonia has embarrassed herself in front of him/in front of us, Prince pretends to drive off. Then when she tries to mount his bike, he pulls away, teasing her and taunting her, establishing a firm superiority and control over her. She responds by kissing him; thus the film renders his behavior not only permissible but enticing. Seemingly she accepts this behavior because she respects his work and his elite status. As female aspirant in a male star's video, she must be content with what little she can get.

The Kid's perverse style of seduction is more successful than Morris'. Appolonia responds to the local lothario with bemusement, which Morris is either too foolish or too drunk to understand. She prefers the misogynist Prince to the vain and phony romantic. Her choices aren't great in the film but the romantic set-ups indicate that the audience should simply accept attraction for what it is and not for what it does to the woman.

M/F: OUTSIDE/INSIDE

A marketable androgyny is often intrinsic to the male music video star; this androgyny stands as a curious signifier of masculinity and power. The Kid's feminized, on-stage exterior — established through makeup, affectation, hairstyle and pretty face — is matched by a strong but silent off-stage exterior. In each case what we see is a mask. On stage, the shell of femininity houses a masturbating, phallus-clutching hero. Backstage, the stubborn, silent lead singer who refuses even to listen to his women band members', Wendy and Lisa's, song covers over his sensitive female side. For he does listen to these early strains of the song "Purple Rain" in private.

This doubling revolves around a plot device: he exhibits appeal on stage and unappealing behavior off stage. When Wendy and Lisa confront the Kid about using their song, he treats them sadistically. He either ignores them or throws his voice in falsetto through a puppet-monkey on his dressing table. The puppet verbally attacks Wendy: "Next thing you know, she'll want to borrow your motorcycle." She exits in response to the Kid's cruel behavior and his insinuating that she wants to seize his

power — his machine. Once the room empties, the puppet cries. But the Kid remains stoic. Though it's a joke, as the monkey emotes, the Kid does not even move his lips. The Kid then turns on the tape recorder and listens carefully to the song. For those who know Prince's work at all, these few bars are immediately recognizable as "Purple Rain," the title song of both the film and the album.

PERFORMING AT/PERFORMING FOR

When the Kid first views Appolonia and Morris together at the club, he gives a performance personally aimed at her. It is the first of what will be a series of personalized performances — each baring the Kid's narcissism, sadism and accompanying talent and power. The Kid glares at Appolonia — a look which in the language of music video connotes the star's power and control. There is a slow zoom in on Appolonia. The shot "picks out" the guilty party though we know she has done nothing to feel guilty about. Along with the song's lyrics, this gaze establishes that she is the subject of the song and performance. The camera and the performance put her in a difficult and contradictory position. She is both the punished object and the grateful recipient. She is placed by camera, performance on stage, and narrative line as "willing" to accept his rage if that's the way he wants it.

In that performance, the song's lyrics end with an ultimatum: "What's it gonna be?/Do you want him?/Or do you want me?/'Cause I want you!" She is touched by the song and the Kid's sentiment (though the song is also competitively directed at Morris). She is flattered by how the Kid's jealousy and possessiveness have made her the object of his song. In that performance, the Kid writhes on the floor, clutching, humping and moaning in a manufactured fog. He always takes a risk that his performance might go too far and be too extreme and thus be funny. That it never is reflects his charisma, masculinity and elite status.

His rapture on the floor connects with music video's predilection for such narcissistic displays. The female audience desires the male star, but the male star remains aloof, in love with who he is and what he does. For the Kid such an attitude is explained in the narrative by his alienation off stage and in his home life, and by the constant connection between his personal life and performances. Though the club owner rejects such public displays, especially with a song about masturbation, the Kid eventually wins him over to the notion that performance is not just a job for the Kid (as it is with Morris) but rather life itself.

YOUR PLACE/MY PLACE

The story line ventures into the Kid's lair at home in his garage. His retreat there emphasizes his shame about and involvement in family violence, a shame and violence which he dramatically projects onto a sadistic treatment of Appolonia. At one point, the Kid precedes Appolonia into his room, disappears, puts on weird, moaning electronic noise on the stereo, and then sneaks up on her from behind. She responds by embracing him, claiming not to be frightened and offering

one silly schoolgirl sexual innuendo after another. He continues to tease her, especially since she explicitly states her desire for him. "Sounds like she's enjoying herself" she remarks about the woman moaning on the tape. "Who is she?" "It's crying backwards," he says in a remark that reflects his own inability to separate pain and suffering from sex and love. "Do you always treat your women like that?" she asks. He answers evasively, "I don't have anyone right now." To the taped sound of the crying/ecstatic woman, they make love. The lovemaking sequence, in fact, was recently edited out of the "held-over" prints, either to widen the audience or to allow those having seen the film in its early days to brag about seeing a legendary print (this release strategy was also employed by APOCALYPSE NOW and AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN).

MALE STARDOM/WOMEN IN THE TRASH BIN II

As Kid's band falls apart around him and Morris and the club owner plot behind his back and his parents fight more, the Kid reacts by becoming more aloof, reticent, alienated, and unfeeling. In response to the women's second query about their song, the Kid sneers at Wendy: "I'm not going to do your stupid music, so get off it!" He seems to fear not only them but their "female song — one that may arouse the "feminine" side of him, an aspect of his young male identity he finds troubling. Such a fear of the female extends to Lisa and Wendy, Appolonia, his mother, and we can assume to women in general.

In private, the Kid continues to study Wendy and Lisa's song — an activity interrupted first by his parents fighting and then by the arrival of Appolonia bearing a gift of the white guitar they saw in the window. At first he's touched, but with the Kid's father's rage resounding in the background, Appolonia announces that she's joined Morris' newly formed Appolonia 6. He hits her and leaves her on the floor holding her face. He issues a warning and delivers a cryptic lecture.

The Kid repeats his father's oddly important line, "I would die for you." This line finds its way into the finale set. For both the Kid and his father, "I would die for you" represents a heroic romantic stance beneath their rage. The Kid invokes the father again, by asking Appolonia, "Don't I make you happy?" The narrative indicates that his destiny is to be just like his old man, and frustration with the opposite sex seemingly explains why.

PURPLE RAIN, for all its violence and discord, also suggests the viability of the U.S. nuclear family. In the same weird way that FOOTLOOSE and TERMS OF ENDEARMENT (two hugely popular films) reinstate this "sacred American value" of family, PURPLE RAIN couples that restorative thematic with another racist political agenda. In PURPLE RAIN, the message "like father like son" indicates some kind of brutal "natural selection" within the U.S. black family dynamic. The film implies that the black male is genetically violent, dissatisfied, and thus unable to play the role of father. Seemingly only the lesson of separation and brutality is what the kid's father has to pass on to his son. For the

Kid, more so than the father's music, this is his legacy.

Despite its racist depiction of irrational and violent behavior, PURPLE RAIN, like a number of other recent U.S. films, embraces this "here comes the American family again" theme. It parallels the social agenda of the political Right. In films like FOOTLOOSE and PURPLE RAIN, happy restorative endings are provided despite major narrative contradictions. Even though the films show us misogyny, brutality and narcissism, their endings ask us to have *faith* in the family's ability to transcend anti-social behavior. In PURPLE RAIN, however, the ending supports the lead character's sociopathology. And his elite status allows him to remain immune to the specific lessons Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson provide for the common man.

In the "final festival" in these films, the embracing celebrations at the end of TERMS OF ENDEARMENT, FOOTLOOSE and PURPLE RAIN, closure is imposed with enthusiasm and conviction. One is asked to have faith in artificial and incomplete solutions and to accept inconsistencies and inequities in the name of sacred values like the family, the church, and the "self-made-man" Horatio Alger mythology. Obviously such endings are ultimately religious in nature.

MAYBE I'M JUST LIKE MY MOTHER
MAYBE I'M JUST LIKE MY FATHER

"When the Doves Cry" and "Let's Go Crazy" still play often on MTV. "When the Doves Cry" tells the off-stage story of the Kid. In the film, "When the Doves Cry" is presented as a montage-story video, with the song on the soundtrack set to marginally related images on screen. To a large extent, "When the Doves Cry" tells "the other story" that the "Let's Go Crazy" performance video elides.

There are two tv video versions of "When the Doves Cry," both of which contain clips from the film and both of which are different from the "video" of the song as depicted in the film. MTV, the increasingly powerful music video network, has had much to do with PURPLE RAIN's box office success. MTV has aired both versions of "When the Doves Cry" — enabling the VJ's to play it more than almost any other song. Likely as a matter of repayment, the distributors of PURPLE RAIN actively participated in MTV's "opening night event," which included red carpet interviews outside the theater and a post-premier party featuring more interviews, clips from the film and of course the tv videos of "When the Doves Cry, I and II" and "Let's Go Crazy".

From what was in many ways an orgy of self-promotion for MTV, notice was served to producers of future youth-targeted motion pictures. PURPLE RAIN has proven that MTV can guarantee publicity and a nationwide audience. Given the supposed difficulties in "making it" simply as a cable tv station (ESPN, USA, and MTV have all claimed that they are losing money), such outside interests may insure a young network's lasting success. And MTV's role as a purveyor of taste, especially within the youth market, should keep the Hollywood studios

interested in a rapid-montage, flashy "video" format.

The chorus in "When the Doves Cry" in all three video versions refers directly to the principal dramatic conflict facing the Kid in the film. The chorus begins, "Maybe I'm just like my father ..." Certainly the kid's brutality and self-destructive attitude support that contention. "Maybe I'm just like my mother ...", the next line, is at first confusing, especially since the mother is given so little to say or do in the film. The following line is, "She's never satisfied." That notion corresponds to the few lines the mother has in the film: "Why don't you ever take me anywhere? ... Why don't we ever have fun anymore?" Those lines cast her as a nag, and they connect the Kid with his father. Both men distrust women and both fear/hate either "woman's" sexual or professional desire.

What is also at stake in this male/female drama is the ongoing adolescent male dilemma, which runs through much of the film up until the father's attempted suicide. The Kid's feminized side has been ridiculed by his androgyny and trivialized by his affectations and has been so much at the root of his violent outbursts. A "feminine sensibility" lies at the heart of "When the Doves Cry." "When the Doves Cry" recapitulates and articulates the central drama. In the film this narrative function becomes tied to images of motorcycle riding and stylized heterosexual contact. But the whole song then provides a layered and subliminal advertisement for music video (and MTV) while we are watching the film, and for the film while we are watching the music videos.

IT'S MY MUSIC/IT'S MY LIFE

The Kid's repetition of his father's mistakes extends beyond their ill treatment of women. Man-to-man the two seldom relate, and in the end the father has but one piece of advice, "Never get married." Immediately following this remark, director Magnoli cuts on sound (to the Kid's music) and then on image (to the club). We see the Kid shot in low angle standing on stage, naked from the waist up, donning a bandit's mask à la Zorro. The first song in this set stages Wendy on her knees, back to the audience; her head is at the level of the Kid's low strung guitar. It obviously connotes her sexual subjugation, and ironically the screeching strains on the guitar emanate from her and not from him. Weirdly the film depicts her as in pornography, serving the man and receiving pleasure from doing so at the same time.

When Appolonia had gone to the club with Morris, the Kid performed a song about Nikki, a sex fiend. His performance ended in masturbatory rapture — stylized first as male and then as female — offering a ridicule of him and Appolonia together. By the end of the song it is clear that the Kid prefers to perform on stage. "Nikki" prompted Appolonia to exit the club crying, to which the Kid, on stage, sneers, "Come back, Nikki. Come back." By literalizing what has obviously referred to Appolonia all along, the Kid affirms the illusory distinction between his on and off stage performances. At this point, the Kid's insistence on venting his personal crises on stage leads to a confrontation with the club owner. "The stage

is no place for your personal shit," the owner says. "It's my life," the Kid responds. "Nobody digs your music but yourself," the owner continues. "You're just like your old man ...," referring to the father's career as composer and pianist. At this moment the owner surfaces as the film's truth teller, its Teiresias. The Kid, the egocentric tragic hero he seemingly so desires to be, descends deeper into his *hubris* in search of the good that lies within the father.

PERFORMANCE/EXHIBITIONISM

The Kid's range of self-expression (and music video stars are nothing if not self-expressive) operates to the rather limited range of music and performance which the film allows the group, Appolonia 6. The "girls" (I use this word in context) are dressed in underwear, garters and stockings: not only prostituted but as prostitutes. Despite their ability to sing, their rendition of the song "Sex Shooter" is undermined by the club audience's view of them as strippers. Their performance is no more exhibitionist than the Kid's, but they simply cannot escape "the mask of beauty." Moreover, Morris has exploited them in revealing costumes and staged them in aggressive postures. They fail. This does not result from a lack of talent, but rather comes about via a fundamental inappropriateness of a semi-strip act to the club, to music video, and to rock and roll in general. The film both presents them with the iconography of strippers and, in the narrative line, has them fail because of that iconography.

HELP ME/HURT ME

To celebrate what they foolishly believe to be a victory over the Kid, Morris and Appolonia exit the club arm in arm. Both are drunk and both have different ideas about how the night will end. Morris is an innocuous suitor; thus the Kid's violent reaction to his involvement with Appolonia is unreasonable and perhaps not even sincere. Still, the Kid "saves" her from Morris, angrily shouting, "Get on," after he runs Morris down on his motorcycle.

But again, soon after this, the Kid punches Appolonia and knocks her down. He offers no apology, only one more explanation and yet another warning. He seems just like his father, especially in the face of success. The racist scenario is extended. Even if the Kid does make it from nobody to star, from a little house to a big one, he will still harbor the self-centered sadism that is his very nature.

The Kid's rescue of Appolonia on the rain-swept urban streets reminds viewers of Nick's rescue of Alex in FLASHDANCE out in front of Mawby's Bar. And in a way, FLASHDANCE and PURPLE RAIN have something else in common. Appolonia shares Alex's dreams of stardom and willingly dresses up, dances on stage and seems a confident, aggressive sexual woman on stage and off. But Appolonia's performance — skimpily dressed and sexually provocative — leads immediately to the connotative connection of any female public performance with striptease. PURPLE RAIN offers that connection as inevitable, which

may be quite perceptive, while FLASHDAUCE myopically argues that Mawby's has a different atmosphere than the sleezy Zanzibar night club or other working-class, all-male urban haunts. PURPLE RAIN dismisses such a naive scenario. Perhaps, in its own perverse way, it ends up presenting a much less pretty but more sophisticated view of female performance in male-dominated public environments.

Nevertheless, PURPLE RAIN remains to the end a violent, misogynist adolescent male fantasy. Though it benefits visually from its stylistic indebtedness to music video, PURPLE RAIN suffers dearly for its refusal to ferret out the violence and sexism from the patriarchal music-video "narrative" formula. As a result, the film is both a vanguard movie musical and a sociopathic parable. Magnoli appears to be clever enough to link a new visual style to a dying genre, but at the same time he is too shallow to couple stylistic innovation with social conscience. Though the film displays a non-bourgeois camera style, it clings to the most repressive of bourgeois fables.

The final scene shows a performance video much like the opening one. It corresponds to both the performance video formula and the classic Hollywood movie musical. When Prince achieves his rightful place in society by finally performing the women's song, the rest of the cast celebrates the event without reservation. His ability to toy with sexual difference, to vent his rage on stage and off, enables him literally to stand above the crowd. When he sings, "I'm no messiah and you're the reason why," he is never more wrong or more dishonest. He dedicates the number to his father. His ability to capitalize on the song and on his father's attempted suicide signifies his heroism. His behavior and nature are irrelevant to the unquestionable cinematic conclusion that he is a star. As a result, nothing undercuts the adolescent-male fable of success. Rather the unswerving development of that myth falls into place within the film's allegiance to music video and to the dream of becoming an elite. Clearly, PURPLE RAIN is telling us that being an elite means never having to say you're sorry.

Return of the Jedi A Situationist perspective

by Jon Lewis

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STAR WARS, and now its second offspring, RETURN OF THE JEDI, has from pre-production been more of an event than a movie. Long lines, screaming fans (of all ages, no doubt), and the elimination of discounted tickets has created — even mandated — a certain experience specific to the STAR WARS films. Dolby quadraphonic, 70mm, fantastic technological effects have heightened the special STAR WARS experience. We do not view STAR WARS just as cinema. Instead, we are to participate in a *spectacle* on screen, in the theater, out in the street, and finally in the larger culture, which so celebrates the film's total experience.

THE STAR WARS PHENOMENON: SEPARATION AND POPULARITY

In an extremely well laid out — and clearly Marxist^[1] — reading of STAR WARS in JUMP CUT, No. 18, Dan Rubey examines the seductive and problematic issue of STAR WARS' popularity. Certainly, Rubey did not identify a single aesthetic formula. Still, he did succeed in revealing STAR WARS' multivalent attraction: that it is all-at-once "high adventure," "epic fantasy," "romance," "sword-and-sorcery," "space opera," and "romance fantasy."^[2] In fact, as Rubey notes, George Lucas himself identified the far-reaching and varied nature of STAR WARS in a remark printed in *Star Wars: From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker*. Said Lucas,

"I call it (STAR WARS) the fairy tale or myth ... It's a children's story ... It all came down ... through the western."^[3]

Stylistically, STAR WARS is grand — it celebrates the very technology that produced it. In theme and genre, it has the stuff of all successful entertainment. It is, according to my application of Guy Debord's analysis in his situationist manifesto, *Society of the Spectacle*, not merely contemporary *divertissement* (diversion, entertainment), but

contemporary ideology packaged (and turned into a commodity) as *divertissement*. As Debord himself puts it:

"The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people."[\[4\]](#)

The situationist "method" in broadest terms refers to the at times inspired, at times violent anarchist and always provocative mass-cultural/mass media critique engaged by the Situationist International, especially the French journal *Internationale Situationniste* and its high profile editors and contributors: Guy Debord, Rene Vienet, Raoul Vaneigem and Michele Bernstein. No single party-line can be synthesized here, given that these texts cover rather wide terrain (urban geography, art and the avant-garde, geopolitics, third world terrorism, Western bureaucracy, the cinema, local politics, campus politics, and the conquest of space) and that they evolve and at times contradict earlier works through the period 1957-1972. Thus I have focused on the best known work (*Society of the Spectacle*) by the movement's iciest voice, Guy Debord.

Society of the Spectacle addresses the problematic relationship between mass media and contemporary society through a complicated discussion of the issue of "separation," first of the symbolic and economic (that the former is subsumed by the latter), and then of worker and product, allegorically and practically presented in terms of spectator and spectacle. In Debord's words:

"The spectacle within society corresponds to a concrete manufacture of alienation" (paragraph 32, 1970 edition).

Such an alienation structurally prevents the formation of counter-ideologies and the assemblance of any functional collective. For Debord the collective shares but one thing, a profound separation that is continuously re-enforced by the spectacular mass media.

The political/ideological mediation presented by the spectacle — what Althusser cited as a process of subjection and interpellation — is often clearly marked on a commodity's surface. In fact, the power and effect of the political/ideological mediation helps make STAR WARS a spectacle and such a popular cinematic event.

The STAR WARS films depend on a collection of spectacular images: grand and small; frenzied and pastoral; and on characters spanning animal, robot, centurion, humanoid, and human modes of being. We can see this same variety — or at least the same dynamics — within the confines of the films' politics. Rubey correctly asserts that the STAR WARS' message is implicitly "conservative and reactionary"[\[5\]](#) — mimicking the political climate generally. In fact, STAR WARS' reactionary nature as a political parable, as an epic adventure in rightwing U.S. politics, offers yet another suggestion for its unprecedented box office appeal,

Rubey argues that

"... much of its (STAR WARS') appeal depend(s) on the ways in which the striking special effects reinforce the fantasies ..."[6]

Through the course of his essay, Rubey explores these fantasies. In extending his argument to mine, I can only surmise that these fantasies contribute to the spectacular effect and nature of the film. By and large, the fantasies Rubey cites are political, or at least politicized: "The desire for destruction," "war as an aesthetic experience," "use and support of racist habits," and the catharsis "of feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness" combine with "youthful exuberance" and classic high adventure notions of heroism, sexuality, family and transcendence.[7]

STAR WARS approaches every style, every genre, every form. Politically, it is at once both transcendent and subjective. All negative aspects (at times, a ceaselessly violent and machine-worshipping negativity) are rendered positive by the all-engulfing, all-encompassing spectacle. Connecting again with Debord's situationist thesis, Debord sees this as the very nature and function[8] of the spectacle:

"The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears.' The attitude that it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance."[9]

One of the best brief discussions of Debord's situationist writings appears in John Brenkman's "Mass Media: From Collective Experience to the Culture of Privation" (*Social Text*, Winter 1979). Brenkman moves from Habermas' discussion of "separation in consumption" to Debord's notion of separation and alienation necessarily mediated by the image (by the spectacle). Debord argues that in advanced capitalism the commodity's functionally determines culture — in that the commodity is "pregnant with significance, not a significance located in its intrinsic qualities ... but a significance constructed out of the commodity's separation from human activity." [10]

This separation results from the spectacle — in the case of STAR WARS, the effected separation and alienation is on a *mass* level,

Brenkman's reading of Debord helps to clarify the frightening and insidious socializing effect of the spectacle:

"... the double tendency of late capitalism and its culture (is) to make the subject's separation in the object consumed (at) the core of social experience, and to destroy the space in which proletarian counter-ideologies can form." [11]

Brenkman's reading of Debord also suggests a connection between

situationism and the distinctively U.S. paranoid political vision of elites, the theory of which was spearheaded by C. Wright Mills. But Mills found it necessary to identify who, in particular, was behind the media — that mediating force between powerless receivers (individuals disconnected by the media) and social action. That Debord shies away from specifying who or what shapes the spectacle makes him all the more appropriate as a theorist here, since STAR WARS is not only a multivalent text but also a commodity produced by a highly distanced, specialized, and somewhat invisible and indiscernible source.

A situationist reading of STAR WARS posits that the film (spectacle) functions in our culture as a mediation between the following: individuals and the workplace, individuals and the culture, individuals and heroism, individuals and family, individuals and God, and finally individuals and political-social-economic power. In the way that it heaps together genres, styles, special effects, machines, advanced weaponry, future worlds and races, STAR WARS offers an experience still further separated from any "real conditions of existence."[\[12\]](#) Separation, Debord argues, is "the Alpha and Omega of the spectacle."[\[13\]](#) Separation mediated by the spectacle has come fundamentally to define our reading and understanding of our "real conditions of existence":

"The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which covers precisely its territory. The very powers which escape us *show themselves* to us in all their force."[\[14\]](#)

Like the earlier STAR WARS films, RETURN OF THE JEDI identifies itself as and reveals in its very nature that it is a commodity. STAR WARS' obvious, superficial commodification has not only led to booms in the toy, clothing and publishing industries, but it has also leaked over (and trickled down) into the massive "buying into" rightwing political strategies. This commodification has renewed positive attitudes towards religion and the military and finally has helped create a *positive* course for Hollywood mass media to follow.

In discussing RETURN OF THE JEDI as a spectacle, we cannot categorically distinguish its ideological underpinnings from the formal cinematic strategies that package these political strategies. We also cannot disconnect the film's popularity from its narrative or its obvious status as a contemporary cultural phenomenon from its conscious (new and improved) packaging of old, time-worn genres and ideologies. Debord is again correct and relevant here in asserting that

"the spectacle is capital (accumulated to such a degree) that it becomes an image."[\[15\]](#)

Arguably, we have only the image itself (the plastic material and our experience) to critique. And such critical activity, according to Debord, ends up offering support to the spectacle itself, even if the critique offers a counter-ideology. My own critical activity here becomes part of the spectacle. Even negation of participation can only serve the ideology of the spectacle and only reinforce the spectacle's liberality and all-

encompassing/all-inclusive nature. With this caveat, I think that analyzing RETURN OF THE JEDI as a spectacle will let us see it as an event which clearly mediates and obscures the distance between aesthetic form and personal action, and thus explore its logic as a commodity.

THE LEGEND OF THE JEDI

The first aspect of RETURN OF THE JEDI I will discuss is how it organizes its spectacular events and stunts into a formalized, mythic-epic package. With regard to this particular film, two distinct stories that comprise the two halves of the film must be considered. Both of these stories are, as Lucas describes them, epic adventures. Everything in them appears on a grand scale, despite the fact that much of the internal structure of the stories is little more than mild soap opera combined with conventional war-action fare. Though the two halves, different as they are, seem to stand alone, they are artificially grafted together in order to form a more appropriate spectacle length.

The first story half involves Luke Skywalker's rescue of Han Solo from the "clutches" of Jabba the Hutt. This first story coheres into a formal "monomyth" structure — as in Joseph Campbell's formula for the "legendary" story.^[16] In the first stage of his heroic quest, the search, Luke returns (corresponding to the final stage of his quest in THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK) to his home planet, which has been taken over by Jabba the Hutt. Luke embarks on a search for Han Solo, who has been incarcerated for not paying a debt (dating back to the bar scene in STAR WARS).

Once Luke has located Solo, the second (trial) stage begins. Before acting, Luke must evaluate the relative ethics of the situation. As with all ethical questions in the film, he reaches a decision with ease and assuredness. Though Solo owes Jabba money, Jabba is shown as wrong because he has sought satisfaction through vigilante justice (kidnapping) and torture. Jabba's methods, inhuman as they are — and he is not human — allows for Luke's uninvited, and for the most part unprovoked, imperialist entrance into Jabba's territory.

Through several revealing cuts, we come to recognize that Lando and Princess Leia in disguise form part of an elaborate rescue plan. We thus will root for this elite band of expert warriors as they attempt to extricate a valued hostage from an inscrutable, racially different, inferior enemy. This staged, positive, and successful rescue coincided with the Tehran crisis, in which U.S. citizens were held hostage, although the film proposes a simpler problem and a much easier and quicker resolution.

The Jedi-led invasion is covert and politically and morally questionable. Yet the invasion's relative merits are not offered for debate. I'd argue that its success, especially since we suspect that Solo (Harrison Ford) will become a hero again, is not in question either. Thus our only real concern becomes the rescue's spectacle, not with the story's content but with its effect. The story serves the spectacle, and the spectacle itself is

an ideological exercise.

That Luke, Lea, Solo and Lando all escape and that Jabba is killed results from two distinct technological events: (1) the organization of the plan of rescue and (2) the skill which the Jedi and his cohorts display with advanced yet ancient-blessed weaponry. Right and wrong are here based on success and failure — one results logically from the other. As it is with the new spaghetti western, another genre co-opted here, expertise and success become the only clear identifiers of good and evil.

Because of the importance of expertise and success, we come to read the plot's trial period independent of ethics. Luke is seen as a hero because of his clear-cut technological superiority and not because of any moral or political code. Within the far-reaching nature of the spectacle, this primary technological index of heroism gains a religious significance. Jedi spirituality coheres around the mastery of a weapon, the light saber, which is anointed by God and the Force. Using the saber becomes an elitist rite.

Princess Lea is a Jedi, too, Here the spectacle integrates as positive an elite-power-oriented connection between heroism, expertise, religion and family (Lea and Luke are siblings).

The final stage of the first story has a return from the first heroic venture, which leads to the search that begins the second story half. Luke, with an army behind him, ventures forth to meet his nemesis, Darth Vader, who he discovers is his father. They feel a powerful, mutual, elite-based bond, for they have common expertise, religion, social standing and family. As elites, they resolve their personal conflict. Again because of its central place within the spectacle, their personal coming together resolves any and all conflicts in the society at large. As in many other heroic spectacles, resolution by elites provides a "logic" for elites' functioning in the political arena.

Though Debord does not refer to C. Wright Mills, his society mediated by spectacle resembles Mills' mass society, powered by elites and populated by individuals who join together temporarily and fruitlessly in powerless and silly interest groups. As a mediating entity, Debord sees the spectacle, and Mills the media, as a general force. In both cases, spectacle and media convince audiences that power exists, but only elsewhere. In mass society, public participation on any level seems fruitless, primarily because power always already exists elsewhere. And whenever people participate in mass society or in the society of the spectacle, such participation then ensures that future power shall also always exist elsewhere.

The trial stage in the second story leads to Luke and Vader's long-awaited confrontation. Luke's ability to infiltrate enemy territory here seems recklessly passive since it is primarily based on faith (in good, in other elites, and finally in family). By confronting not only Vader but an even more powerful evil one unarmed (the Emperor), Luke's faith is rewarded, His father vindicates the mass genocide that Vader had

executed in two previous films and in much of this one by his penultimate efforts to save his son.

In that scene Vader, big and black-armored, fascinatingly speaks with the voice of a familiar black actor (James Earl Jones). He becomes white and unmasked only after he comes to Luke's defense. In his dying moments, he becomes an old white man with an egg-shaped bald head, lionized along with Yoda and Ben Kenobe. Those father figures form a trinity for Luke.

In the final stage of the story, Luke returns to a world with no death star. He is no longer jealous of Solo's relationship with Leia (now his sister) and no longer in search of his lineage. RETURN OF THE JEDI reduces Luke's story to that of an orphan seeking an absent, negligent parent. As Luke comes face to face with an antagonistic, contradictory father figure, the nuclear family's love and power win out. What plagued a galaxy pales in comparison. All the death-star's wrongdoings become rectified symbolically and effectively with Luke's reconciling his family drama. As the story restricts itself to family drama, it makes love the Force^[17] and the convention of the family the logical social order. That's the heart and soul of this All-American adventure parable,

THE MODEL ECONOMY

Strangely, the mass media's master criminals can amass a prodigious, loyal workforce to effect world domination and mind control. For example, Goldfinger (in the James Bond spectacles which preceded and now borrow from STAR WARS) manned his factory with Koreans, whose loyalty he thought resulted from their stupidity, malleability, and complete lack of conscience and regard for morality. Goldfinger's racism was not his undoing but rather his underestimating Bond's expertise. Goldfinger's dark side — colored by greed, cheating at cards and golf, cold-blooded murder of enemies and associates, and fanatical ambition — in fact licensed 007's covert activity.

In RETURN OF THE JEDI, evil literally stands as a dark side of the Force. That side operates through mind control and gains power from man's, especially Vader's, innate tendency toward violence. The films, however, often render violence positive, and Dan Rubey cleverly argues that such an attitude toward violence offers part of the complex explanation for STAR WARS' success.^[18] Within the Force, an elite status accrues to those who *feel* the Force (the Jedi knight, Lord Vader, Princess Leia and the Emperor). The white armored centurions and the uniformed functionaries are just subjected to it,

Debord argues that the spectacle's thematics extend well beyond formal, narrative-logical significance. Thus we can understand these fundamental thematic divisions as indications of fundamental social divisions. According to Debord, this is one of the spectacle's essential functions:

"The institutionalization of the social division of labor, the

formation of classes, (has) given rise to a first sacred contemplation, the mythical order, with which every power shrouds itself from the beginning."[\[19\]](#)

Once we learn that Vader himself is at least half machine, we can see how the centurions (the enslaved workers) are like him and how to an extent he is like them. This could explain, for example, why his identity as the evil black Lord Vader is so temporary. For the time being, Vader and the centurions' understanding of the common good as promised in the Emperor's technological-totalitarian future is not only part of their very nature but perhaps also necessary for their very survival. It makes their allegiance to the Emperor logical, despite his distance and cruelty.

Ironically the droids, all machine, have personality and uniqueness. The wanton annihilation of the centurions not only exposes that they are just soldiers, "bodies doing a job" [\[20\]](#), but that they are undifferentiated and interchangeable as well. The droids, on the other hand, scream as they are branded in Jabba's dungeon. As members of the Alliance, the droids are elevated to the status of active bearers of democracy. Though Rubey is generally correct in maintaining that STAR WARS "supports racist habits," the droids' humanization does stipulate a non-racist revolutionary force. Here droids are people, too,

In the second half of the film, the animal kingdom joins the droids. Here we see the extent to which the Alliance contains all. Now, the Ewoks (fighting beavers) and the droids range from mere pets to tin woodsmen (with hearts already as big as an autumn Kansas sky). Alongside these personified beavers and robots, Luke, Lando, Solo and especially Lea hilariously appear wooden and stiff. Not only are Hamill, Williams, Ford and Fisher weak actors, but it is irrelevant to the film whether or not they can act.

Society here is built upon spectacular technology and its embrace of family, religion and heroic myth. Contained within the spectacle as relevant and important is hard work. Ironically such work is relatively unimportant for the elites, who profoundly affect culture by their day-to-day resolving of family problems. Thus, the rather extensive killing in RETURN OF THE JEDI becomes irrelevant in the overall scheme of things, despite the fact that Alliance fly-boys are killed along with centurions. Alliance fighters are all also just workers, interchangeable, in stark contrast to the story's star-elites.

In an obvious parallel between Jedi society and our own, workers on both sides are interchangeable and expendable. This leads to their muddled position between human and not-human and to an emphasis on the elite-controlled, lineage-based culture where religion and progress develop only at the expense of the workers' lives. RETURN OF THE JEDI also sets up a clear distinction between labor and effect. Not only is the individual laborer's life and death unimportant, but his work, however much he struggles, is irrelevant as well. Unlike the elites, the individual worker is not only separated from the fruits of his labor, but also from any real efficacy which may come from his labor. Work for its

own sake gets performed as part of a cultural habit, resulting in alienation and irrelevance. This seems consistent with Debord and again with "elite theory," here argued by Erich Fromm in "Alienation under Capitalism":

"It is (a) fact that man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished thing dependant on powers outside of himself, onto whom he has projected his living substance."[\[21\]](#)

THE DEATH STAR, DIPLOMACY AND THE DOMINO THEORY

The domino theory has been the pervasive paranoid delusion dominating U.S. foreign policy since World War II.[\[22\]](#) Here, the death star is this illusion come to (represented/spectacular) life. The death star runs with a constantly self-replenishing work force of loyal military-industrial workers. And its proposed goal is to spread, virus-like, across the universe. It engulfs or destroys whole planets in the name of its master[\[23\]](#), the Emperor, and his mission. Imperialism wears no veil in this society, but simply is part of the society's evil nature,

The Alliance, the rebel force, is comprised of diverse frog-people, Ewoks, personable droids, Wookies, blacks, little black sambo first mates, Knights, Princesses and individualist rogues. Its appeal arises from its out of many, one credo. That society expresses the original U.S. revolutionary (as opposed to contemporary revolutionary) ethos in its construction and is led by a conventional U.S. military hierarchy (Solo and Lando lead the attack force after being made generals). The revolutionary force is made more hierarchical by the elevated status of Princess Leia and the Jedi knight. The film thus suggests a correlation between this revolution and the glorious days of Arthur and Charlemagne, between all heroic quests and U.S. military missions, past and present, and finally between making battle into a mere spectacle and any rational political and/or moral analysis.

We are informed at the start of the film that the empire is an imperialist force and that poorly armed rebels have organized to restore freedom to the galaxy. From the outset, we encounter a clear distinction regarding relative imperialisms. The empire represents bad imperialism because it opposes freedom. Bad imperialism is connected with high-powered military warfare, a tendency to use devastating weaponry and a will toward totalitarian rule. The rebels, elite-led, expose the brighter side of imperialist action; their activity is licensed in the name of liberation.

Ironically, the U.S.-identified rebel force — this band of freedom fighters — wins because of expertise at guerrilla warfare. The failure of U.S. forces in Viet Nam and today in Central America here becomes victoriously reversed by invoking heroic myths. For example, it invokes the U.S. revolutionary force which defeated the more powerful British colonizing force through a superior sense of terrain and the employment of a new style of warfare. In fact, RETURN OF THE JEDI must resurrect the Revolutionary War, since that war provides the first and last

successful guerrilla operation in U.S. military history.

The film makes obvious contemporary political parallels. The human soldiers on the dark side wear Russian-style uniforms, love military processions, and have an apparent over-confidence in their military equipment and work force. Such details point to U.S. notions about Soviet militarism. The film then contrasts this Soviet military style with the Alliance's U.S.-style video technology and capitalist division of labor. In the war room scene, for instance, each of the Alliance's elites gets to speak on their own field of expertise, as they stand in front of computer graphics on a giant video screen.

Each side is clearly revealed in the confrontation scene between Luke and the Emperor. Luke petulantly remarks, "Your overconfidence is your weakness," to which the Emperor replies, "Yours is your faith in your friends." The Emperor's final two words, spoken with scorn, emphasize depersonalized imperialism: domination for domination's sake and victory for victory's sake, superior weaponry, betrayal, entrapment and the unabashed celebration of the military-industrial complex. With the Empire as exemplar of evil, the rebel force can define and mask violent conquest as liberation — as a sanitary, God and Force-anointed victory for a galaxy-wide culture, who will then all share an elitist ethic. Here the film seems most clearly a spectacle. Imperialism and liberation here differ solely in style, not in content.

ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS[\[24\]](#)

RETURN OF THE JEDI employs a rather conventional *modus operandi*, using religion and sexuality to locate good and evil. Jabba, for example, likes bondage, as seen in the opening scene in his lair. The exotic dancer he has chained to his flipper resists. This gives him almost as much pleasure as dropping her into a pit under his platform. He subsequently replaces her with Leia, who does not dance or act but is still held on a leash until that day when she will learn to love him. As one of many off-color jokes in this early scene, Jabba appears as a giant limp penis to which Leia is reluctantly and temporarily chained. She is dressed in a futuristic bikini[\[25\]](#) that is pressed up against Jabba's tail, which flicks up and down as he sleeps.

Jabba's habitat is highly eroticized. He lives in a dark den of iniquity over which only his own supreme aberrance could so clearly rule. His decision to drop Solo and Luke into a giant desert anus indicates his love for an "unclean" kill. This seems a fatal flaw shared by all master criminals, be it Lex Luthor or the Riddler or Goldfinger. Jabba's reluctance simply to vaporize the Jedi and his future brother-in-law reveals why he's bad and why he fails. And Jabba's style of eroticism and violence sets up Luke as a moral force who will clean up that salacious world.

Leia murders Jabba with the very chain he had used to captivate her. Then his *style* of sexuality — that of exaggerated male aggression and sadistically imposed sexual fantasy — becomes replaced by Leia's

significantly more conventional love for Solo and sisterly affection for Luke. As she defeats the perverse Jabba, Leia moves away from a role as a sexual object, one which she simply cannot play. She is returned to a less uncomfortable role as sister/friend. We see clearly her tendency to be an earth-mother type, which Fisher acts well, in her confrontation with an Ewok, whom she tames with *a wafer* and motherly caresses. Later on we see her emerging from an Ewok hut up in the trees dressed all in deerskin. Stripped of her warrior raiments, she has become the earth goddess the highly masculinized Ewoks need.

The Ewoks — animists, pygmies, cannibals and loyal freedom fighters — are highly spiritual. Thus they simply must fight alongside Luke and oppose the agnostic masses aboard the death star. Earlier, while tying Luke and Solo to stakes, they deified C3PO. As nature's beings, they ironically worship the golden droid, which reveals their foolish nature^[26] and enables Luke to exploit their ignorance and superstition with a simple (advanced culture/Jedi) magic trick. Here he extricates himself and his cohorts from that curiously Christian-looking burning at the stake. In this scene, and formally in the Ewoks' decision to join the rebel force, the narrative unites the Force with primitive religion. All mysticism and animism, all ancient cults, are shown to be related. They become reconciled and contained by the conventional contemporary ethics and iconography of Western Christianity. Here again the spectacle effectively contains all that is good but superficially different. Everything is homogenized in the name of the all-encompassing spectacle and the common good,

In an early scene in Jabba's fortress, the first time we see Solo, he's frozen in Carbonite. His suspension and subsequent resurrection leaves behind a Shroud of Turin as he re-emerges as a Christian hero. As Luke enters Jabba's chamber in robes, he sports a priest's collar and looks much like Ben Kenobe and his pre-Vader father. Luke's mystical power becomes reinforced by that other-worldly trinity — Yoda, the father, and Ben Kenobe, who appears repeatedly as an apparition. The film clearly marks Luke's divine right as an imperialist and as a hero, not only because of his activities and journey in this heroic adventure-myth, but also because of his exalted status in a religious parable.

Such Christian religious iconography, mythos, and sexual attitudes make RETURN OF THE JEDI so North American. The conventionality of and promised return to old ethics identify Luke as an earth-bound deliverer — a Moses or a Christ bearing up under the strains of world liberation. The convergence of Christianity and imperialism not only identifies the Alliance activity with Divine Will (be done), but also again reveals the spectacle's power to reconcile and contain disparate cultural elements, rendering them consistent and positive,

The convergence of religion and liberation/ imperialism makes the "clean" kill important — in the case of this film, vaporization. Unclean deaths are faced (but escaped by Luke and Solo) and an Ewok actually experiences one in a jarring moment on the forest moon. Clearly his/its

death with body intact feels different to the viewer than vaporization. Such emotional manipulation reveals the way the film stylistically differentiates between imperialism and liberation. Violence is connected to the religious iconography and, in terms of warfare and imperialism, it is rendered either positive or negative depending on whether or not it is Christian or involves characters whom we have come to see as Christian.

Violence and sex — so long as they are Christian in style or motivation — surface as part of the lighter side of the homogenized culture that the spectacle mediates. RETURN OF THE JEDI correlates essential aspects of mainstream U.S. culture: Christianity, stylized militarism, stylized sexuality, stylized violence, and legendary notions of heroism and elite-ruled society. In addition, the film reveals what should make it the essential U.S. entertainment package of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It offers little excuse for its political function and purpose. RETURN OF THE JEDI (read here all the STAR WARS films) emerges as the motion picture spectacle of United States at its blessed, clean-kill, imperialist best.

Notes

[1.](#) I am making sure to point this out here because (1) my reading of RETURN OF THE JEDI is from a situationist perspective and not Marxist, and (2) Rubey clearly marks his agenda as Marxist on the surface of his text. The best example of this is his reading of the Force: "... the Force is actually a mystical substitute for the collective action, learning and hard work needed to effect change" (p. 12). Such an optimistic/ humanist assumption would hardly fit in a situationist reading. For this very suggestive Marxist reading of STAR WARS, do see: Dan Rubey, "Star Wars: Not So Far Away," JUMP CUT, No. 18, p. 9-14.

[2.](#) Rubey, p. 10.

[3.](#) Rubey, p. 10.

[4.](#) Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), paragraph 4.

[5.](#) Rubey, p. 11.

[6.](#) Rubey, p. 9.

[7.](#) Rubey, p. 9-12.

[8.](#) It is interesting that both Debord and Althusser put emphasis (for different reasons) on the relation between ideology's function and definition. For both writers it is the function of ideology that defines it:

1. "The spectacle subjugates living men to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated them," (Debord, paragraph 16).
2. "... all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects." (Louis Althusser, "Ideology and

Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 171.

9. Debord, paragraph 12.

10. John Brenkman, "Mass Media: From Collective Experience to the Culture of Privation," *Social Text*, Winter 1979, p. 100.

11. Brenkman, p. 100-101.

12. "Real conditions" for Althusser distinguish "actual" existence from representative/fictive/imaginary existence. Here I am using his term to offer the same distinction.

13. Debord, paragraph 25.

14. Debord, cited by Brenkman, p. 100. (Note here that Brenkman is referring to the 1970 Black and Red edition of *Society of the Spectacle*.)

15. Brenkman citing Debord (and the 1970 edition), p. 100.

16. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), p. 30.

17. I think that it is important to note here that I do not see the Force as "collective action" as Rubey does (see note #1), but rather as an indefinable and far-reaching concept.

18. Rubey, p. 9, 10 and 12.

19. Debord, paragraph 25.

20. Being "just a soldier" is an important point here. It is precisely this "I am just a body doing a job" philosophy (a verbatim reference to the final speech in Frederick Wiseman's HIGH SCHOOL) that allows people to transcend their fear of death and respect for the life of others.

21. Erich From, "Alienation Under Capitalism," in *Man Alone*, ed. by Eric and Mary Josephson (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 59.

22. The domino theory seems a common belief among most U.S. conservatives. Ironically, it also has provided a formalized link between the White House (of Nixon, Carter and now Reagan) and Anastasio Somoza, whose book, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, compiled from data acquired by his secret police, promises that the conflict will hit the southern border of the United States in the next few years. That the White House should share anything at all with the likes of Somoza remains a frightening reality.

23. Both Jabba and the Emperor are referred to as "master." Lea and Luke prefer less obvious and questionable titles. Differentiation here again seems a matter of rhetoric and style.

[24.](#) Thanks here to Sharon Lemmis for her help on this section.

[25.](#) Ironically, on SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE, Carrie Fisher had donned a bikini in a STAR WARS/BEACH PARTY spoof. Perhaps that skit proved to be an inspiration for this scene.

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The Year of Living Dangerously Can vision be a model for knowledge?

by Carolyn A. Durham

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Critical reviews of Peter Weir's *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* have tended to interpret Weir's film as disturbingly apolitical in its focus on conventional romantic myths: the heroic adventure story or the sentimental plot of the couple in love. *Cahiers du cinéma*, for example, views *YEAR* as a dangerously naive version of "the myth of the reporter-adventurer."^[1] Similarly, in *Ms.*, Lindsay Van Gelder criticizes Weir's obscuring of the unethical detachment of his heroes by filming what she characterizes as "essentially a love story of two attractive winners tacked onto a backdrop of human suffering."^[2] There is no doubt that *YEAR* includes, particularly in any standard summary form, many characteristics of conventional romantic narrative. Guy Hamilton (Mel Gibson), an Australian journalist on assignment in Indonesia in 1965, forms a partnership with the photographer Billy Kwan (Linda Hunt) whose connections afford Hamilton both the professional benefit of exclusive interviews and the personal benefit of an affair with Jill Bryant (Sigourney Weaver), assistant to the British military attach. After Kwan's death as the result of his attempt to display a banner critical of Sukarno and after Guy's own wounding in his effort to cover the unsuccessful community uprising, Guy and Jill escape from Indonesia together.

I will argue that this mythology of the hero and the couple functions not as a plot in its own right, but as one of a series of motifs used by Weir in an attack on Western ideology. This attack is thorough and relentless to the point of challenging both his own film and certain possibilities of film itself. Indeed, *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* is a profoundly self-reflexive film, in which the notion of the visual functions centrally as both image and theme. As an art form, film supports and reinforces the emphasis on the visual that characterizes the Western hierarchy of the senses. But Weir uses this very necessity of the medium to explore and ultimately to critique the implications of using vision as a

model for knowledge.

The assistance Billy initially offers to Guy — "I can be your eyes" — appropriately casts Guy (and the spectator) in the role of a blindman. Billy proposes to teach Guy and the West which Guy symbolizes, "how to see." Guy conceives of sight in the traditional Western sense as a means of distancing and objectifying the object of knowledge. This definition of self in opposition to all else leads Guy to a fundamental attitude and comportment of disengagement. From the beginning, he tells Billy that he "can't afford to get involved." Against this theory of vision as dissociative, Billy seeks to recall the parallel, if paradoxical, connective function of the visual. For Billy, seeing is associated with empathy, contact, commitment. Where Guy uses opposition through difference, Billy substitutes communion through likeness, so that verb "to see" becomes synonymous with the verb "to feel." He tells Guy: "I made you *see* things, *feel* something about what you write." Billy wants Guy to see the "real" Djakarta: uncounted numbers of people living in extreme poverty, dying from starvation and disease.

In a recent reexamination of the role that vision has played in Western thought, Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontowski suggest that historically the growing emphasis on the visual "eye" led to the birth of the personal "I."^[3] Certainly Weir associates a visual theory of knowledge with Western individualism. Guy believes that his traditional linkage of scientific objectivity with journalistic practice allows him to see reality as it really is, free from the interference of personal or cultural assumptions. In fact, he projects images of a profound subjectivity in which he reflects and sees only his own self.

Throughout *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*, Weir uses his camera technique, and an ideology of the image particular to his political conception of film, to question, to undermine, and ultimately to deny the Western ideal of objectivity so aptly incarnated in journalism. Given the importance of "point of view" in film technique, the stress that recent narrative theory has placed on the dual meaning of the term has special significance in film studies. Point of view is not only perceptual, involving a positioning in space and time, but also ideological, incorporating an attitude toward the object of representation.^[4] Weir insists that we acknowledge the political dimension of film narrative by consistently making perspective itself part of the represented image.

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY often repeats a type of shot in which Westerners ostensibly perceive Indonesian reality. Most often, Guy drives or is driven through the city of Djakarta. We look with Guy through the windshield of the car at the masses of the Indonesian poor beyond. But not only is our view of this professed object of representation always distorted by an image that is slightly out of focus and further blurred by the counter movement of the car and the crowds, but the shot in fact foregrounds in perfect focus the huge silhouette of Guy himself. Weir thus demonstrates both the lack of objective distance of the Western journalist and the essential fact that it is our own

inevitable presence in our representation that functions to obliterate that which we claim to represent. The viewer blocks out the viewed, the subject displaces the object, the Western cult of the self is superimposed on the Eastern collectivity. Interestingly, in the final still photograph of the film on which the camera focuses, a picture of Billy and Guy clearly of metaphoric importance, Billy has used a self-timer to place himself in his own picture.

In the typical shot of *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*, the car's claustrophobic self-containment reinforces the importance of framing as a device to insist on the substitution of image for reality. In one of the film's central episodes, we see Billy looking through a camera rather than at reality itself. Moreover, as spectators we find ourselves distanced even further, for Weir's camera films Billy's camera filming the march on the U.S. embassy. This interior duplication functions as a self-enclosing and a self-referential device as all such images do; but in Weir's critique of Western ideology, self-reflexivity serves not to celebrate the autonomy of art but to further illustrate the myopia of Western vision. Weir again uses the functioning of film to call into question the seeming realism of the medium itself.

Although Guy is a television journalist, we never see the film that presumably constitutes the essential part of his broadcasts. Similarly, Weir's own film consistently substitutes Billy's still photographs for the moving pictures of the movie camera. To see in two rather than three dimensions is to lack perspective, to perceive only a reflection of reality, and, most importantly, to see only surfaces, that is, to see superficially. Guy's literal blinding at the end of the film reinforces the metaphoric structure of *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*, the inextricable connection between the eye of the camera and the I of the Western mind. Guy has a detached retina, the photographic element of the eye on which light forms the visual image. Guy's inability to see is reflected in the failure of the visual medium itself: the walls of Billy's room, initially covered with photographs, have been stripped bare. Moreover, since two eyes are necessary to see relief, Guy, blinded in one eye, is now literally reduced to two-dimensional vision.

Ultimately, and much more radically given Billy's self-identification with the East, it is not only Guy who cannot see but Billy as well. Indeed, as Billy tells Guy early in the film, they "have the same eyes," they look alike, that is, they see in the same way. If Weir illustrates through Guy the inability of the West to see, to perceive a reality that differs from its own cultural assumptions, he reveals through Billy the equal dangers inherent in seeing badly. Billy demonstrates the twin visual abuses of the Western concept of knowledge as it functions in the East: espionage and voyeurism. Whether or not Billy works for anyone else, Guy rightfully accuses him of spying. Although Billy claims to seek visual communion with others, he in fact embodies the very model of the reporter he scorns in Guy. Billy looks *at* and not *with* others in an effort to surprise their secrets. That the information Billy gleans both focuses predominantly on Westerners and is apparently destined only for his

own private files merely reinforces the blind self-absorption of the West that Weir critiques throughout *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*. The union in Billy of the spy and the voyeur — he photographs Guy and Jill without their knowledge and prowls around the house in which they make love — pinpoints the dual perversion of the Western journalist for whom knowledge is both interference (invasion of privacy) and alienated desire (possession without commitment).

Weir uses the erotic associations of the visual to support his broader critique of the abuse of power inherent in the West's politics of vision. *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* is a male-bonding film — all the Western journalists are men — in which women, both Western and Eastern, figure as the sexual objects of male regard. More importantly, the very first photographs we encounter are the pornographic pictures that the journalists pass around in the hotel bar. Thus, the visual image itself is connected to voyeuristic exploitation even as it is introduced. Moreover, the ensuing discussion about the distinction between pornography and art, linked significantly to a picture being in or out of focus, prepares us for Weir's subsequent investigation into the fundamental ambivalence of the goals and values of Western ideology and the primary importance of perspective in determining its merit. Weir later establishes a thematic association between sexual politics and the general politics of exploitation to complement the formal connection. In visually parallel scenes, the car, symbol of Western power and isolation, is surrounded by the communist demonstrators in front of the U.S. Embassy and the Indonesian prostitutes in the cemetery. The camera thus makes the connection between sexual and colonial exploitation, between erotic and ideological voyeurism, which Billy sums up in his final accusation that both Sukarno and the West use the Indonesian people as "objects of pleasure."

For all its emphasis on the visual, film as an art form explores with difficulty all the possibilities of the specular. Weir exploits the degree to which film supports the dissociative visual experience that underlies Western alienation from all that is not its own self. *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* repeatedly denies the possibility of direct eye contact, which in seeming to do away with distance could become the paradigm for the communion between the East and the West in which Billy claims to believe. Although Guy must remove his sunglasses at the palace gates so that the guards may assess his true character, Sukarno keeps his own sunglasses on during the look he exchanges with Guy in the following scene. Not only is Sukarno's self thus hidden from Western eyes, but his glasses reflect back to Guy only his own self image. Sukarno, who will be revealed in the course of the film as the puppet of the West, illustrates one danger of Western interference in Indonesia: the Eastern eye may become a passive lens which receives Western images projected from without. Throughout the film the massive photographs of Sukarno juxtaposed against the Indonesian crowd create the same optical illusion of the dominance of the individual as in the foregrounding of the huge silhouettes of Guy, Jill, and Billy in similarly

composed shots. In the end Sukarno will not see Billy's banner: "Sukarno, feed your people." He is as incapable as the Western journalists and diplomats of perceiving the poverty and misery of the real Djakarta.

But, much more radically, Weir forces us as viewers to confront the degree to which this real East remains closed to our Western gaze once it refuses to reflect back to us our own image. Guy's one attempt to discover the unseen that Billy asserts to be all around us results in a story on the Lombok famine in which the central and controlling image is visual:

"It's the faces you can't forget, the dull, listless, hollow eyes."

At first it seems that these authentic images of the East will be conjured away with the reductive Western interpretation of the story as "a bit melodramatic." However, Weir's solution is even more disturbing. He constantly confronts us with Billy's photographs of the Indonesian poor in cuts which always emphasize the eyes and often move in to a close up of the eyes alone. The Indonesians gaze upon us with a look that is indeed "hollow," a stare which remains resolutely closed to our penetration, which looks neither inward nor outward but which functions as an absolute barrier as impenetrable as the bandage which swathes Guy's eyes or the blank screen which serves as our own blindfold at the end of the film.

Vision also suggests the power of the imagination, and a literal reading of Billy's assertion to Guy — "I made you see things" — focuses on his role as creator, as conjuror. Billy's subversion of the traditional Christian message he preaches is clear from the beginning of the film. Billy, who photographs himself dressed as Sukarno, "a god to his people," wishes to be God, not to worship Him. In Weir's rigorously self-referential film, God equals the artist. And Billy, who is "master on the blank page and in the darkroom," represents in particular the documentary filmmaker or the television journalist who controls both the script and the image. In part because he is a journalist, Billy's association of creativity with possession and control has important implications for our understanding of Western ideology. Billy uses the photograph and the written narrative, the raw materials of journalistic reportage, to fix reality, to reduce living human beings to static and non-temporal objects. The film consistently cuts from the shot of a character to Billy's photographic reproduction or typed portrait that allows him to assert, "I shuffle people like cards."

In its suggestion that news is less something one reports or discovers than something one invents, *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* further challenges the mimetic pretensions of Western journalism and film as realistic art forms. Bernard Kolb's concern that the film "accurately represent what had happened" in the Indonesia he covered in the sixties for the *New York Times* inevitably results in disappointment and deception.^[5] Far from imitating reality, Billy creates a story whose origins are eminently literary and whose

embodiment of the cultural norms of the West works against the recording of the material reality of the East.^[6] In what might be read as an interior duplication of the film's own critical reception, Billy rewrites the tragedy and the horror story of Indonesia as a romantic narrative.

The historian Hayden White sees "inherently amoral or immoral implications" in Romanticism's focus of on the individual as against the species.^[7] Although Billy seems to pose the dilemma of Indonesia in collective terms ("What then must we do?"), he creates in Guy the paradigm of the isolated, unattached, egocentric hero ("I created you."). Often filmed alone and isolated in his own images, Guy believes in his ability to alter Indonesia's historical process by imposing his own individual will and enacting his own causal agency. Moreover, the danger that Billy foresees for Jill — the bitterness of the failed Romantic — in fact reflects back on him. When Guy fails to fulfill his role as savior, Billy takes upon himself this futile and self-sacrificial mission.^[8]

Billy's Christian charity and Western sentimentality privilege interpersonal relationships, the need to love ("Why can't you learn to love?"). Although Billy seems once again to focus on a collective bond, he, in fact, creates ("I gave her to you, and now I'm taking her back") a story of romantic love that definitively blinds Guy and Jill to the realities of Indonesia. Similarly, Billy's own adoption of an Indonesian woman and child allows him to deny Sukarno's responsibility for the conditions of his country. In the midst of the decay and poverty of Djakarta, Guy and Jill live out the stereotypical Western dream. The lovers' rainy luncheon date blocks out the Indonesian crowd around them. The danger of running a roadblock after curfew transforms the political turmoil of Indonesia into the gratuitous risk and violence that feed Western eroticism. The lovers' quarrel itself turns the Indonesian civil war into a matter of purely individual concern. For Guy, it translates into an opportunity for personal glory; for Jill, into an issue of individual safety.

Romantic love, as the West encodes it, purports to be "outside" ideology; thus Jill's flight from the embassy reception to join Guy affirms its status as an irresistible drive that flaunts social conventions. However, as Mary Poovey pertinently interprets it, love is a central part of bourgeois society's cultural ideology.^[9] Romantic love supports the separation of public and private spheres on which Western social structure is founded by perpetuating the fundamental myth that private gratification can compensate for economic and political exploitation in the public sphere. In *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*, the foregrounding of the couple relationship (in the friendships between Guy and Billy and between Billy and Jill as well as with the lovers) flatters the Western desire for autonomy and power even as it disguises the total inability of personal relationships to wield social influence, to affect the material conditions of society.

Ultimately, *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY* stands in its very celebration of the medium of film as a profoundly pessimistic statement

about the possibilities of film itself. Weir turns certain inherent limitations of the camera — the difficulty that the visual image always encounters when it attempts to enter human consciousness, whether individual or collective — to his advantage; the impossibility of a structural form becomes a sociocultural message. But in the course of his exploration of the conditions of seeing, the necessary foundation of a cinematographic art, Weir seems to conclude that there are times when the artist is not God, when reality resists arrangement. In the confrontation of the West and the East, film cannot be representational; it can only deal with the impossibility of representation. Such films must finally be self-referential of necessity. They must refer the West back to itself to reveal the West to itself in its egocentric self-absorption. The message is clear if painful: We reflect only ourselves. We should reflect on ourselves. Only then can we learn to see beyond and behind our cultural assumptions.

Notes

1. *Cahiers du Cinéma* 348/349, June-July 1983. p. 41.
2. Lindsay Van Gelder, "Gender-Bending for its Own Sake," *Ms.*, April 1983, p. 73. See also David Ansen, *Newsweek* 24 January 1983, p. 66, and Vincent Canby, *The New York Times* 21 January 1983, p. C4, for similar interpretations. For a rare analysis of *YEAR* as an overtly political film, see Leslie Bennett, "East and West Meet Amid Mystery in Peter Weir's New Film," *The New York Times* 16 January 1983, p. 23.
3. Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, "The Mind's Eye," in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 207-224. My discussion of the visual as model of knowledge draws on the insights of Keller and Grontkowski.
4. For recent discussions of the ideological dimension of point of view, see Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen, 1977) and Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981).
5. Bernard Kolb, "Cinematic Art vs. Reality in Indonesia," *The New York Times* 23 January 1983, P. 17.
6. Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978) argues convincingly that we use story types to make sense of our own life histories, that is, to endow them with culturally sanctioned meanings.
7. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 1973), p. 84.
8. White, *Metahistory*. p. 8, notes that Western ideology often embodies the romantic drama of the triumph of good over evil in the story of Christ. In *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*, Billy is consistently and ironically associated with Christ imagery ("I'll crucify you," Pete

tells Billy on several occasions).

[9.](#) Mary Poovey, "Persuasion and the Promises of Love," in *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, ed. Carolyn Heilbrun and Margaret Higonnet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 171-177.

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Fitzcarraldo Exotic and perverse

by Howard Davis and Dilwyn Jenkins

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Fitzcarraldo has returned to his long sleep and Herzog's passions and pockets have been temporarily replenished, but the Peruvian jungle still hasn't recovered from the director's latest cinematic extravaganza. As a film, FITZCARRALDO has been hailed by some critics as a masterpiece, a beautiful idea visualized in a magnificently exotic landscape. Only the clichéd messianic quality of the protagonist's personality (which unfolds jerkily in a brittle, plastic fashion) remains preserved on celluloid to remind us of the otherworldly realities that underlie this epic production. In fact, several different realities are inextricably tangled together in Herzog's perverted *bricolage* of events, some which actually occurred almost a century ago, the rest a complete fantasy. Both the historical figure of Fitzcarraldo and Herzog himself were brutally motivated aliens penetrating deep inside a strangely vibrant environment. It is not accidental that the maps of the region, shown in close-up three times during the course of the film, suggest fertility symbols, nor that Fitzcarraldo is given precisely nine months to exploit the jungles natural resources.

Within this territory, still beyond the ultimate control of Western civilization, dwell a number of indigenous groups, including some 35,000 Campa-Ashaninka and Matsiguenga Indians who live in a relatively free and harmonious state in close spiritual contact with the tropical rain forest. Their own self-defined culture is a unique social reality, utterly foreign to the world of the commercial cinema.

Having already made AGUIRRE, WRATH OF GOD in the Amazon, Herzog was aware well in advance how difficult clashes between different cultures could become: film crews sweating in a remote jungle location, thousands of native extras completely ignorant of production techniques, very few of them having even seen a film, and an environment that the Peruvians themselves describe as *el infierno verde*. Brave, insane, or both, Herzog returned, determined to force his way in and carve out his dreams vision, and stealing thousands of Indian

souls in the process.

Before filming could begin, Herzog was immediately faced with the problem of finding an alternative location when the Aguaruna Indians in northern Peru violently ejected the entire film crew, protesting against the arrogant attitude of the filmmakers and the manner in which they had walked into villages and attempted to take control. The Aguaruna are the most politically unified native group in the entire Amazon, with a strong and often militant tribal council that has reacted quickly to outsiders who once again tried to take without giving back in return, or even asking first. Some of the council-members were jailed and a German aid-worker, who had been helping the Indians plant rice, was almost drowned by the film crew. After six months of argument, during which Herzog ordered soldiers to intimidate a village assembly by firing over their heads, the Aguarunas had had enough. They burnt down the film crew's camp and bundled its workers and equipment into three canoes, forcing Herzog to look for another playground in which to realize his fantasies.

Then Jason Robards, Herzog's original leading actor, contracted amoebic dysentery and was forced to quit the production. The consequent delay meant that co-star Mick Jagger also had to leave due to prior engagements (i.e., a commercially lucrative tour of North America). A new location was found on the lower Urubamba River at the foothills of the Peruvian Andes. An unfortunate airplane accident, injuring four Indians and the pilot, again delayed the film. Later, another Indian, his wife, and daughter were attacked near the film site by an unfriendly local tribe, the Amahuacas. The man was shot through the neck by a five-foot arrow and his wife was badly wounded in the hip.

Herzog fatuously claimed that the Indians were lucky that he had a doctor on set, failing to realize (or at least to admit) the fact that his policy of relocating diverse tribal groups in alien territory was bound to create inter-ethnic friction. The Indian extras, almost 1,000 in total, were housed in barrack room conditions. The food was appalling and medical supplies limited. There were not enough women to produce the Indians' staple, a drink made from manioc. The only diversion possible was soccer until the ball burst. One native died of malaria, sparking off a period of heightened tension. Some extras worked on the film for six months, their official rate of pay being around two dollars a day. The majority of them had been relocated hundreds of miles from their homes, families, and most importantly, their gardens. When the extras agreed to work on the film, they were unaware of two facts. First, that the project would take twice as long as Herzog had promised them. And second, that for most of this time the extras would work as laborers, clearing forest slopes and trying to haul a 365 ton ship up a 40-degree incline — a ship that was ten times larger than the original.

There are a number of disturbing similarities between Fitzcarraldo and Herzog's relations to Indian affairs. They both used the Indians to drag a ship over a hill. They both took Indians from a variety of areas to work a

long way from home. They both paid the Indians very little. In short, they both exploited the indigenous people for personal gain.

The full moon illuminating the jungle on the night that the Molly Aida finally reaches the hill's summit emphasizes the sublunary relationship between man, water, and madness, like the captain who navigates by tasting the river water. Nevertheless, we aren't led to believe that Fitzcarraldo is completely irrational. Indeed, he is arguably Herzog's least insane protagonist. Compared to Aguirre, Kaspar Hauser, and Woyzeck, Fitzcarraldo's efforts are relatively successful. He may fail to acquire enough capital to create his dream of an Opera House in Iquitos. However, he does manage to sell his ship (which has assured a talismanic value of symbolic exchange from its passage through the rapids) and hence, finance the transportation of an entire Opera Company dressed as New World Protestant settlers to this outpost of "civilization."

Fitzcarraldo seizes on the idea of a close link between the oneiric world of opera and that of the dream state, a separate reality achieved through the ritualized Campa-Ashaninka Indians and communal use of hallucinogens. As the Molly Aida proceeds upstream from Iquitos, it anchors at a mission post where two longhaired Christian monks speak of the difficulty of converting the Indians because of the local people's belief in the reality of dreams. Fitzcarraldo reveals an excited understanding of this through his passion for opera, comparing the visionary belief system of a hunting and gathering culture with the relative decadence of a bourgeois art form. Opera for Fitzcarraldo, film for Herzog! Fitzcarraldo wanted to bring culture to the jungle. Herzog wanted to bring the jungle to the "civilized world. Both fail to bridge two different realities.

An ingenuous combination of dramatic fiction and ethnographic documentary, FITZCARRALDO demonstrates Herzog's desire to record the traces of a unique event that would never have taken place had it not been for the presence of the camera in the first place. As a former conceptual/performance artist, Herzog ignored an anthropological trend which suggests that the ideal ethnographic film would involve an invisible camera running twenty-four hours a day with the film left unedited. Instead Herzog stressed how the process of filming was an almost superhuman task under such arduous conditions. This claim is reinforced in all the extra-textual materials preceding the film's commercial release in the United States (articles in *Film Comment*, *American Film*, *Rolling Stone*, and Les Blanc's BURDEN OF DREAMS).

This kind of publicity can hardly have escaped the attention of even the most casual of filmgoers. It created a myth around the film that was subsequently converted into a marketing strategy. We were constantly reminded how Herzog himself underwent the hazards faced by his protagonist, sharing the same mental and physical agony. Herzog appealed directly to a Bazinian fascination with the filmed event, with the ontology of the photographic image, creating for us the proof that

this Herculean task was indeed performed. The filming of Herzog's adventure was thus transformed into a happening, which was in turn "documented" by Les Blanc's film.

The centerpiece of this spectacle, in which vision is displayed as a guarantee of truth, is the Molly Aida's torturously slow progress uphill. Using a classic suspense structure, Herzog created a specifically cinematic tension with a series of shots showing only fragmented parts of the ship. The spectator remains unsure whether the ship was actually moving upwards or mere camera trickery. Herzog saved a long shot of the entire ship as final evidence that the image was not achieved by some special effects department. In reality the ship was allowed to slide down the same slope that the Indians had just pulled it up — a fact which *BURDEN OF DREAMS* fails to mention, remaining totally complicit in perpetuating the illusion of capturing some sort of definitive, unmediated reality on film.

Although cast and crew soon learned how soul-destroying prolonged location shooting could be, they remained unaware of film's devastating potential for stealing souls. Unlike the former, the natives were never shown a script nor a contract. Within the diegesis itself, they are displayed as a threatening force, first announced by the sound of dreams not even indigenous to the area, suggesting instead an African origin. The Indians are termed "bare-asses" by the subtitles and linked with a view of nature that can be traced at least as far back as Rousseau. The first time we see them is when they blockade the river with their canoes, an impossible feat without tying the canoes together, a highly improbable tactic. When the Molly Aida crushes an Indian to death, the natives disappear into the forest, leaving Fitzcarraldo and his crew anticipating an imminent attack. But when the natives reappear, it is only to drag the ship to the very top of the hill.

Without scripts or cutting-room access, the Indians' souls are literally stolen in the sense that their image can now be flashed onto a screen anywhere in the world without their knowledge and without them having any say in how they are portrayed, or even how their occasionally subtitled speech is interpreted. Their appearance from the bowels of the jungle associates them with a mysterious, magical, mystical existence; only two Indians become recognizable characters within the fiction. As actors, they are stunningly successful, considering that they had nothing more demanding to do than stand around, clear jungle hillsides of dense undergrowth, look in the right direction at the right time, and above all, just "be themselves, i.e. astonishingly natural performers whose clothes and face-paint blends with the jungle backdrop.

Even when they are depicted as workers, the Indians remain an anonymous, ant-like crowd whose sole function is to get the ship over the hill. The objectification of their labor becomes abstract. Besides Molly, the Indians are the only ones to have faith in Fitzcarraldo's vision, to believe in the ship's divine ability to survive the rapids. Having dragged it over the hill, they loose the ship from its moorings. Smiling

and chanting, they float it down through the Pongo rapids as a sacrifice to the River god. But when they finally reach Iquitos and the ship is sold, the Indians' presence is simply erased. We last see them standing uneasily on the edge of a veranda, stiffly celebrating the Molly Aida's sale with glasses of champagne. At the point of this cash nexus, when the problem raised at the films start is resolved through Fitzcarraldo's financial and symbolic liquidation, the Campa-Ashaninka simply disappear. We can only speculate as to the conditions of squalor that await them on the periphery of Western civilization, as their prophesied promised land assumes a distinctly sinister aspect.

Herzog's view of cinema as a quasi-religious, transcendental experience equates not only the process of filmmaking with supernatural forces, but also the filmmaker with a godlike presence. The Indians' treatment underlines an attitude that the completion of the film was Herzog's top priority. It hints of a kind of crazed loyalty, of madness mixed with devotion, which emerges from comments made by cast and crew in *BURDEN OF DREAMS*. This pseudo-magical blend of director and protagonist (with Kinski again cast as Herzog's alter ego) may be called into question as much for its mystical underpinnings as for its basic logical flaw. Does a film on Nazi Germany necessitate the actual extermination of six million Jews? Is this really the final filmic solution?

It was precisely this attitude that enraged many Peruvian intellectuals when Les Blanc showed *BURDEN OF DREAMS* in Lima in September, 1983. It was Peru's first glimpse of Herzog's product (*FITZCARRALDO* has yet to be released in Peru). But if Blanc were fishing for compliments, he certainly didn't get any from the audience in the Social Science Department of La Católica University. Not that he deserved them. The camerawork was uninspired, alternating between the touristic, the voyeuristic, and the ridiculously serious. The text never came to grips with the story of making the film, nor any other narrative process for that matter. In La Católica the general opinion was that *BURDEN OF DREAMS* was whitewash, possibly initiated by Herzog himself to excuse his disastrous production record. This isn't that far from the truth. After all, *BURDEN OF DREAMS* was a film made by *gringos* for a *gringo* audience, designed to entertain, rather than enlighten. As such, it didn't linger on the friction Herzog had created. Les Blanc was only in Peru for three months during the two-year period in which the film was shot. How could he be expected to portray such a complicated and unfortunate situation in anything but a superficial fashion? To the Peruvian audience (who were aware of the background details since many of them were anthropologists who had worked with the Campa-Ashaninka) the most interesting moments of Blanc's film seemed to have been shot by Herzog's crew on Les Blanc's behalf.

Fitzcarraldo may be dead. But for the Indians there remains the ever-present threat of colonists, lumber companies, engineers, and government agencies who are still causing permanent damage to both the forest and the Indians' way of life. These people may once have been integrated harmoniously with their environment, but today the plight of

the Campa-Ashaninka is almost hopeless as they are forced to change from their traditional, semi-nomadic life to sedentary one. Every time the Indians move, there is another settler waiting to take over their land. The only answer for them is to stay put and keep intruders out, while fighting at national and international levels for their legal land rights. Herzog had promised to help them acquire these legal rights, a promise that he had no power to keep and that clearly came from a man desperate to fulfill his capricious dreams. Not only did he fail to obtain land rights, but also the very act of relocating some 1,000 natives for six months made a large proportion of the tribe vulnerable to invasion by peasants from the mountain regions of Peru.

In 1980 thousands of Campa-Ashaninka Indians made their way on rafts down river and by foot through the forest to reach polling stations in the depths of Peru's central jungle. Almost unanimously, they voted for the return of President Belaunde and his Popular Action Party, which had always expressed an interest in the problems of the jungle and its development. The Indians placed their hopes in this new government as part of a renewed attempt to establish their legal right to territory around the rivers Ene and Tambo, which are the only regions left to them after four centuries of "civilizing influence.

Unfortunately, Belaunde's concept of the jungle problems did not coincide with the needs of the native population; since his inauguration, the plight of the Campa and Ashaninka Indians has steadily worsened. Lumber companies have been invited to bid for Campa-Ashaninka territory, and landless peasants have been subsidized to colonize the region. Belaunde's government was only saved from collapse in 1982 by placing seven of Peru's highland provinces under martial law and sending 1,500 heavily armed troops into these regions to try (in vain) to weed out a Maoist band of revolutionaries known as Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path). While Indians from the Ene River were acting as extras for Herzog, on the parallel, but relatively distant Urubamba River, colonists from the mountains moved on to the best of the land, the fertile banks of the Ene valley. Clandestine activity in the last twelve months has revealed a sinister twist to these invasions: the colonists, sponsored by businessmen, have been growing *coca*. Armed with machine guns, private boats have terrorized local natives and missionaries while making their connections with light aircraft bound for Colombia (where the basic coca-paste is processed into cocaine for the immensely lucrative U.S. market). Sendero Luminoso also appears to have their main hide-out in the isolated region of the Upper Ene, known as the Apurimac, where five European tourists were embarrassingly arrested as suspected terrorists in 1983. Both of these illegal activities began to flourish in Campa-Ashaninka territory while Herzog was reliving his dream only a few hundred miles away.

It is highly ironic that the filming of FITZCARRALDO should begin at the same time as a revolutionary growth in the political awareness of the Indians and the intellectually-led but popularly-based Sendero Luminoso. While the Indians were being portrayed in the role of natives

being exploited by a rubber baron, the urgency of their territorial situation and the intervention of various aid groups brought the tribe to a new level of action. In June 1980 six Indian delegates arrived in Lima to present their case to the new Ministry of Agriculture.

One of the delegates at a press conference asked,

"We cannot wait for the authorities much longer. We are being provoked. Soon even more colonists will arrive to take our land. What will our sons do when all the trees are gone and there is nowhere to move on to?"

The Indians went on to explain that in the Ene region alone the tribe faces competition from six well-organized colonization projects and at least two influential lumber companies. The colonists entered the area in great force during the last months of 1979 in anticipation of Belaunde's electoral success and the ensuing probability of a determined jungle development drive with the high profit incentive of growing coca illicitly.

It is this conflict of interest that Belaunde faces. On the one hand are the Indians who want nothing more than the right to live on the land that they have always inhabited. On the other are the landless peasants and capitalist entrepreneurs who want to exploit the same territory. An additional problem for Belaunde are the claims being made by the lumber company, Forestal Apurimac (FASA), by Carlos Rivera, a former top official in the same Ministry of Agriculture on whose shelves the Indian's land titles have been gathering dust for four years.

FASA is seeking a concession of 89,000 hectares of forest on the left margin of the River Ene, an area that had been previously designated to three Ashaninka communities by an aid group, CIPA, who had registered the claims with the Ministry. More recent reports explain that there are six other lumber companies also seeking concessions in the area. Between them, they hope to obtain 1,100,000 hectares of virgin forest. As long as the Indians are without land titles, this region is officially unpopulated which means that the land can be given to the companies. The situation is absurd for two reasons. First, the population of an officially unpopulated area helped vote the government into power. Secondly, according to the 1974 Law of Native Communities, the communities that do exist should already have been awarded land titles. The Peruvian press, CIPA, and another group, Acotepa, have been suggesting that powerful vested interests are manipulating the Ministry's decisions. Indeed, one of the lumber companies is connected to the Romero Group, Belaunde's most powerful business associates.

It is a disturbing fact that the difficult situation that has developed on the Ene River is dominated by clandestine business interests much more powerful than Fitzcarraldo was or Herzog will ever be. Yet this new invasion is taking away the Campa-Ashaninka land base (their capital), rather than their time and energy (their labor), which has been the traditional mode of exploitation. To a National Human Rights

Commission that visited the Indian territories in 1980, one of the village elders complained:

"We are worried about this situation. It is not like the colonists say. They don't know or live better than us. The land is ours; we have lived on it for longer than memory. But now we cannot even visit our relatives and trading partners in safety because the colonists, who have revolvers and dynamite, live between us and them."

When asked what they would do if they were not given land titles, another Indian replied, "We are men and we will do what we have to in the moment."

Although the Commission filed reports with both the United Nations and the Peruvian Ministry of Agriculture, the situation for the Campa-Ashaninka is still undecided. The colonists are still there and increasing every month. The threat of the lumber companies rests heavily while the Indians, now that Herzog has departed, continue with their daily rounds of hunting, fishing, and gathering. They cannot go on strike, nor march en masse to the Presidential Palace. Their present lot is to wait and see which way the politico-legal pendulum swings. Herzog, who took it upon himself to depict the situation of exploited Indians (both in film and in practice), has stolen their souls by giving credence to an imperialistic image of the noble savage. When Les Blanc screened his film in Lima, he informed us that Herzog was now working in Australia ... Has anyone warned the aborigines?

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Terms of Endearment Bourgeois morality tale

by Douglas Kellner

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TERMS OF ENDEARMENT, an extremely popular Hollywood film, won more Oscars than any other film in 1983. The film is entertaining and skillfully concocted. Its popularity also derives from its cunning manipulation of real sexual conflicts and contemporary emotional problems, which it cleverly resolves through offering a traditional conservative sexual agenda. Thus, TERMS has a liberal openness to free sexual expression and explores contemporary sexual politics at the same time that it conservatively affirms the family and traditional sex roles. Part of the resurgence of Hollywood melodrama, like other recent films it shows families undergoing crisis and potential disintegration. Yet unlike KRAMER VERSUS KRAMER, ORDINARY PEOPLE, AUTHOR, AUTHOR, and many others which portray unfaithful or insensitive wives as wreckers of the family, and nurturing fathers as saviors, TERMS OF ENDEARMENT sympathizes with the wife and presents the husband in an extremely ambivalent light.^[1] But although TERMS has some feminist twists, it can also be read as an attack on feminism and sexual liberalism. In the following reading, I shall show how TERMS lays out the contemporary sexual conflicts that confront a generation which has experienced the changing sexual mores of the 1960s and 1970s. I shall attempt both to explain the film's popularity and to indicate the ideological parameters and limitations of the film's sexual politics,

WOMEN, THE FAMILY, AND SEXUALITY

TERMS is directed by James Brooks, a former TV director who was the creative force behind *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, and *Taxi*. The film combines TV sitcom and melodramatic codes to present a bourgeois morality tale.^[2] Although TERMS' subject matter, family tragedy, refers back to the tradition of Hollywood women's pictures' that flourished from the 1930s through Douglas Sirk's 1950s family melodramas, its style and representational codes derive from TV and show a growing hybridization between film and television in the United

States.^[3] Like an increasing number of television movies, it focuses on contemporary social problems. Stylistically, it quickly presents a situation of emotional intensity and then cuts to another scene in a structure that allows for little continuity, in-depth development of character, or serious discussion of the issues. Everyday life is portrayed as a series of disconnected little dramas. In *TERMS* this narrative strategy poses all significant life-choices around whether they preserve or threaten marriage and family. None of the main characters seem to have any outside interests or activities that transcend family or sexuality.

In the opening title sequence, a young mother, Aurora (Shirley MacLaine) anxiously bends over her daughter, afraid that the sleeping baby has stopped breathing. In the next episode, which follows the never-depicted father's funeral, the lonely mother crawls into bed with her daughter. These interior scenes use soft muted lighting and romantically framed images of mother love, though they also seem to project a critical image of the overly doting U.S. mother (scathingly critiqued as "Momism" by Philip Wylie).^[4] By the end of the film, mother love is strongly affirmed and redeemed as the film as a whole demonstrates what are both proper and improper roles for wives, husbands and parents.

The film cuts to an exterior setting with the daughter Emma (Debra Winger) sitting on the front lawn with her skirt provocatively positioned over her knees. Moving men leer at her while they carry the goods of a famous ex-astronaut to the house next door. Her blonde girlfriend Patsy leans over and pulls Emma's skirt down over her knees. The film maintains this contrast between Emma's more open and expressive sexuality and Patsy's more conventional sexual role-playing. Scene after scene develops Emma's personality, making her a sympathetic vehicle for audience identification. On the night before her marriage, Emma gets stoned with Patsy as they listen to Ethel Merman sing "Anything Goes." This scene presents Emma as sexy, feisty, slightly rebellious and blending the modern (smoking pot) with the traditional (getting married, listening to Ethel Merman). Although the pop song has a traditional melody, its lyrics, "Anything Goes," suggests openness and readiness for adventure. The song also blends the modern with the traditional, although we shall see that the plot later discredits "the modern" (i.e., sexual liberalism) to affirm more traditional values and gender roles.

Against her mother's advice, Emma marries Flap, a young university English professor, who her mother believes is too immature and not ambitious enough. Flap and Emma's early scenes together portray a strong mutual sexual attraction, and Emma is consistently associated with a provocative and procreative sexuality. She bears three children in less than ten years, and when she fears that her husband is having an affair, she also takes a lover. Within this "modern" representation of a strong independent woman who refuses to accept the traditional "double standard," Emma becomes symbolically punished for her

sexuality. In fact, confirmation of her husband's infidelity coincides with news of her cancer, so that the film establishes a parallel between illness and sexual irresponsibility. The film's "message" is that women (and married men) must never risk infidelity and thus lose the most enduring love and emotional support in the face of life's sufferings and tragedies.

The first two-thirds of the film focus on the mother-daughter relation and on problems of marriage and family. Like *KRAMER VS. KRAMER*, *ORDINARY PEOPLE*, *SHOOT THE MOON*, and other recent family melodramas, nothing social or political intrudes from the outside to disturb the family drama. Though the film supposedly takes place within a thirty-year period from the 50s to the present, no 60s politics are mentioned nor feminist issues posed (except negative references to abortion), and the characters have no concern for politics or social life whatsoever. The events have no historical context. Though the action covers several decades, we see only trivial, not clearly defined changes in fashion. Upper and middle-class everyday life seems to exist as an eternal situation of similar personal conflicts and resolutions. In this life of archetypal Personal Relationships, the Family is shown to be the only trustworthy and enduring Form. In fact, *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT* is stylistically noteworthy for its adroit manipulation of stereotypes and clichés, which make the mixture, appear fresh and "modern."

Although the daughter Emma has a close girlfriend and the mother Aurora has several steady suitors, the film focuses all social activity around the home. The scenes that show mothers, daughters, and husband leaving the house to have affairs depict events that threaten the home. During much of the film, *TERMS* seems to defend less constricting sex roles for women. Aurora, too, takes on a lover after long resisting physical relations with her Houston suitors. She recognizes the fleetingness of life after her 50th birthday, and seeks both passionate sex and intimacy with a male. Thus *TERMS* seems at first to point to women's more independent stance toward men in contemporary U.S. culture.

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT seems to include conflicting ideological tendencies, some patently conservative, others less easily assimilable to traditional morality. Like many Hollywood films, it wants to have things both ways, presenting, on one hand, liberalized sexual values for the more "modern" audience and conservative values for more traditional folks. The plot's ideological negotiation also ends up being a successful marketing strategy.

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS, AND MEN

TERMS especially focuses on mother-daughter relationships and problems of single or widowed mothers. As the film progresses, it depicts shifting and evolving relations between the mother and daughter and focuses on Aurora's growing ability to become a competent and loving mother. At first, Aurora seems to be rather self-centered and not need the daughter. She does not go to Emma's wedding, is not close to Emma's friends, nor even intimate with Emma. However, the two draw

closer together after the daughter marries and leaves the house. The film plays on anxieties that aging women face when their children leave home and they feel no longer needed. *TERMS* assuages this anxiety by showing a situation where the daughter increasingly needs her mother's advice, support, and love. It holds out the hope that single, middle-aged women can find love and purpose after raising their children. The frequent conflicts between mother and daughter become resolved.

Since most Hollywood films have been centering on father-children relationships or problems of teenage boys growing up, the emphasis on mother-daughter relationships could have provided a feminist twist to the film. Its portrayal of the relationship is, however, ideologically ambiguous. On one hand, it realistically portrays the tendency of mothers to excessively dwell on their daughters and to live vicariously through their lives. And it depicts how some daughters remain overly dependent on their mothers for primary relationships and emotional support.

TERMS also represents contemporary marital conflicts. The husband puts his career and other interests before his wife and never really gives her an opportunity to help decide if they should take new jobs and move or not. However, such a conflict between domesticity and career is never really developed. Likewise, the choices concerning childbearing are not really posed though they hover in the background of the drama. At one point, Emma discovers that she is pregnant with her third child and the mother suggests abortion. Emma reacts with horror and anger and via identification positions the audience to consider abortion negatively, but the film never explores the options. It is significant here that it is the mother who suggests abortion and the daughter who resists it. This generational switch points to anti-abortion positions appealing to younger women.

Most of the main characters, in fact, contain a contradictory mixture of "liberalism" and "conservatism." Debra Winger's Emma, for instance, contains a contradictory mixture of an independent woman and a traditional loving daughter and mother. Winger has consistently played such roles — of relatively strong women who end up submitting themselves completely to men, in films such as *URBAN COWBOY*, *CANNERY ROW*, and *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN*. Emma's unrepressed sexuality and vitality in *TERMS* is structured into a traditional wife/mother role. Even her affair is justified by her husband's infidelity, so that the film can make the point that the family cannot survive with infidelity on the part of either husband or wife.^[5]

Aurora's lover, the astronaut Garrett, and Emma's husband Flap both contain a similar "mixture" of characteristics. Garrett moves toward a traditional husband/father role, while Flap increasingly fails as husband/father. Flap doesn't seem emotionally wrought-up over Emma's death. At one point, we see him in the hospital cafeteria eating a gigantic meal and reading a book until Aurora comes to tell him that under no circumstances will she permit him to raise the children. Flap

seems too weak and irresponsible to assume the responsibilities of husband and father. He drifts into affairs because he is naive and immature, rather than actively sexually aggressive.

Yet Flap is also selfish and manipulative and always seems to be running off to the library (and other women), leaving his wife to do all of the domestic chores and caring for the children. Moreover, Emma never questions her domesticity, nor does she suggest that Flap play a role in these areas. Again *TERMS* implicitly raises an issue — should the wife have sole responsibility for child-rearing — but never articulates it. Certainly no sharing of domestic labor is posited.

TERMS has been popular with male audiences. Perhaps men identify with Flap's refusal to take more domestic responsibility and with both Flap and the astronaut Garrett's refusal to commit themselves to monogamous relationships. Perhaps *TERMS* also projects a subliminal male fantasy of the wife's dying so that the male can pursue another love interest.^[6] While Flap initially claims that he wants to raise the children after Emma's death, he surrenders them to Aurora without any real protest, admitting that he's not really suited for it and thus freeing himself from parental responsibilities. Although the theme of male flight from the family is not really developed, it does provide a subtext that may in part account for male attraction to the film.^[7]

Jack Nicholson's astronaut character, Garrett, shifts from a dissolute and irresponsible bachelor to an acceptable father-figure and potential husband. At first, Garrett is a vulgar neurotic playboy who is basically lonely and slightly pathetic. When he enters into the relation with Aurora, he becomes transformed into a more charming and likeable fellow — until he tells Aurora that he cannot assume responsibility for a relationship. And then, the plot redeems and transforms him because he takes responsibility for the relation and even enters into a father role. *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT* suggests that without matrimony, family responsibility, and strong commitment, men will engage in rampant promiscuity. Consequently, the film advances the conservative anti-feminist argument that women's liberation and the ERA are bad because they would allow men to leave the family. It suggests only the family restrains men back from incessant billy-goating. Any departure from that norm signifies disaster.

Thus, *TERMS* uses an engaging story line, appealing characters, real social problems and conflicts, and a seemingly "realist" style to convey conservative messages. Although it seems to affirm sexual liberalism, it finally validates only certain sexual arrangements and attacks others. By shifting the focus to the mother Aurora and her astronaut lover during the second half of the film, the conflicts within Emma's family are displaced. We worry now whether or not Aurora will be able to humanize and domesticate the rather obnoxious astronaut. As she does so, the film posits marriage as the solution to single people's problems. In fact, only the mother and the astronaut undergo significant transformations. The mother is frustrated and unhappy until she takes

on a lover, and the astronaut is transformed from a dissolute Lothario into a "nice guy." He shows up at the hospital where Emma is dying, and he finally assumes a father role for Emma's bitter and emotionally closed son in the final funeral scene. Garrett Breedlove, as his name indicates, redeems himself through the roles of husband and father. The film thus privileges these roles as the "proper" functions for men. Underneath the macho surface dwells a "nice guy." The film offers this reassuring message for neurotic males who want to be sexually irresponsible but also to feel good about themselves.

CANCER, DEATH, AND THE TRIUMPH OF CONSERVATISM

The cancer scenes most effectively convey TERMS' conservative sexual politics. The scenes of Emma dying, surrounded by husband, children, mother, and friends call attention to what has been lost through her disease (and what would have been lost if she and her husband continued to have affairs). These scenes depicting Emma's unsuccessful fight against cancer use intense white lighting and the sterile hospital decor to dramatize the family tragedy. The very length and emotional jabs of the cancer scenes elicit morbid sympathy from the audience and position viewers to accept traditional values. Emma's death's lengthy duration on screen promotes the idea of endurance. And the scenes showing all the family members pulling together to come to terms with their grief and love promotes a pro-family ideology. In fact, one of the film's many objectionable features is that it does not explore how people cope with cancer, as in a pro-feminist film like INDEPENDENCE DAY. Cancer is merely a plot device to focus sympathy on the wife and to enable the family to reconstitute itself.

TERMS therefore ends up affirming "mid-American" and suburban values over more urban cosmopolitanism. In the grocery store scene where Emma meets her soon-to-be lover, that Midwest banker rebukes the checkout girl for rudeness when Emma doesn't have enough money to pay the bill, and then he says that Emma must be from New York (the audience cracks up). When the dying Emma travels to New York with a friend, the New York workingwomen talk of their divorces, abortions and herpes. In the New York scenes, the camera focuses on the faces of the workingwomen and emphasizes their condescending and pseudo-sophisticated ways of relating to Emma. The film rejects liberal cosmopolitanism in favor of conservative mid-American family values. All workingwomen or independent women without men are shown to be unhappy and frustrated. The film posits the proper role for women as faithful, nurturing wife and mother.

This is, of course, a conservative male fantasy. Andrew Sarris suggests that Emma is the "fantasy Nurturing Woman" as projected by author Larry McMurtry, upon whose book the film is based, and that this fantasy has been used in other films based on McMurtry's novels: Cloris Leachman's coach's wife in THE LAST PICTURE SHOW, and in Blythe Danner's LOVING MOLLY.^[8] TERMS insinuates that transgressions lead to cancer, herpes, abortion, sexual frustration, and emotional

incompleteness. Thus, like much domestic melodrama, *TERMS* valorizes suffering and submissiveness as women's lot. The "terms of endearment" turn out to be those familial ties, rituals, and love, which should provide a haven in an otherwise heartless world. *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT* ends up advocating traditional gender roles within the family as the only institution capable of offering support and nurture in the face of life's hardships. And the film shows no viable alternatives. For example, the friend Patsy's desire to raise Emma's daughter as a single mother is discredited when the dying Emma tells Patsy that the girl's younger brother could not bear to have his sister taken away and that the children must remain together.

TERMS' popularity indicates how much people need emotional stability and security in a time of instability and insecurity. The whole current cycle of family melodramas shows vast confusion concerning sexual roles and the need for reassurance. On the one hand, the films reflect the increasing self-concern of an ascendant white upper-middle class that no longer wants to be bothered with questions of poverty or inequality. But the films can also be read as pointing to the crisis of values in U.S. institutions and people's need for an alternative sexual politics that provide security, empathy, warmth, and love without the neurotic forms of dependency that adhere to the traditional patriarchal family. The popularity of these films thus provides a challenge to feminists and leftists to reflect on the confused state of interpersonal relations and everyday life in advanced capitalist societies and to provide meaningful alternatives to middle class life and values.

Notes

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[1.](#) A number of articles have criticized the scapegoating of women in films like *KRAMER VS. KRAMER*, *ORDINARY PEOPLE*, etc. which can be interpreted as attacks on feminism. See Thomas W.O. Brian, "Love and Death in the American Movie," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 9, No. 2 (Summer 1980-81), 91-92; Elayne Rapping, "The View From Hollywood: The American Family and the American Dream," *Socialist Review*, 67 (Jan.-Feb. 1983), 71-92; Molly Haskell, "Lights ... Camera ... Daddy!" *The Nation* (May 28, 1983), 673-675; and Kellner-Ryan, *Camera Politica*.

[2.](#) On the codes of TV situation comedies as morality plays, see Douglas Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *Socialist Review*, 45 (May-June 1979), 19-22.

[3.](#) On the tradition of Hollywood women's films, see Molly Haskell,

From Reverence to Rape (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974) and Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon, 1973).

4. See Philip Wylie, *The Generation of Vipers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1958). *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT* begins with the stereotype of the selfish, needy, and domineering mother, but the narrative shows her softening and humanized through the relationship with her lover and her assuming a more proper mother's role with her daughter as the years go by.

5. The filmmakers cut out scenes portraying the fun, tenderness, and intensity of the lovemaking between Emma and the Midwestern banker. See the article by John Lithgow, who played the banker, in *Film Comment* (Nov.-Dec. 1983), 28-32, who details the cut scenes. It is as if the filmmakers went to far in the direction of celebrating extra-marital sexuality and later decided to firmly come down on the side of traditional morality.

6. On the standard melodramatic formula of wives dying, or disappearing, so that the husband can pursue other love interests, see "Incest, Bigamy, and Incurable Disease" by Charles Derry, and "Men, Sex, and Money in Recent Family Melodramas" by Ellen Seiter, *Journal of the University Film Association*, 1983.

7. On male flight from the family, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

8. Andrew Sarris, "The Topic of Cancer," *Village Voice* (Dec. 13, 1983), 72. Sarris also remarks:

"To win an Oscar, actresses must be suffering and submissive creatures with excessively messy lives. This is both the message and the mechanism of *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT* as the most widely admired tearjerker of the year" (p. 28).

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom The return of the repressed

by Moishe Postone and Elizabeth Traube

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George Lucas and Steven Spielberg have emerged in recent years as masters of Hollywood entertainment cinema. They specialize in slick, technically sophisticated science fiction and adventure films, modeled on the popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s and promising a way to recover the innocent pleasures of childhood movie-viewing. Yet Lucas and Spielberg's high-tech, traditionalist mythology lacks innocence, and this is nowhere so apparent as in their latest blockbuster, INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM.

Although much of the critical debate on this film revolved around its entertainment value and its suitability for children, some critics observed that the film projects a worldview. For instance David Denby noted,

"... it is clear that Lucas and Spielberg do not intend any 'commentary' on the pop junk of their youth. On the contrary, they have simply found the world they want to live in" (*New York Magazine*, June 4, 1984).

Denby, however, did not proceed to examine the parameters of that world. J. Hoberman went further and scathingly characterized the film's assumptions as racist and sexist (*The Village Voice*, June 5, 1984). Yet he stopped short of examining the process by which those ideologies are produced and transmitted in the film. Our purpose in this essay is to examine that process of ideology production in INDIANA JONES.

Serious analysis of "entertainment" films encounters widespread resistance in the United States today. Such a stance is itself ideological. It obscures the political significance of mass entertainment and hinders processes of social and cultural self-reflection. By turning to the popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s, Lucas/Spielberg are expressing and helping to shape a widespread U.S. yearning, ascendant since the mid-1970s and embodied in the Reagan Presidency. It is a longing to return to earlier, presumably simpler times, a longing provoked by an

increasingly complex world in which the very basis of U.S. self-understanding — the upward political, social and economic trajectory of the U.S. relative to the rest of the world began to crumble. The resultant cultural disorientation has led to a desire to escape the complexities of the present, reinforced by a reluctance to understand social problems in social terms, which is so deeply embedded in U.S. popular consciousness. This desire to avoid life's complexities is a basic motif in the Lucas-Spielberg films. Hollywood's young super-bards take no delight in any heroism that operates within society or in mastering life's ordinary and extraordinary trials. Rather, they celebrate a desire to flee from all such complications, and they disguise their avoidance of society as manful adventure.

It is not simply the desire to escape into the past, however, that marks INDIANA JONES; it is also the content of that return. Under cover of a playful nostalgia for earlier exotic adventure films, comics and movie serials, Lucas/Spielberg have magnified and given new power to two major themes of earlier mass culture, namely imperialist and patriarchal domination. These themes are drawn together in INDIANA JONES through what appear to be loosely connected plotlines, the adventure story and the love story. Both plotlines unfold to structurally similar resolutions, in which a light-hearted reaffirmation of old-fashioned sexism and racism appears as the necessary alternative to the forces of darkness.

Not only the film's ideological project but also its latent mode of operation need to be analyzed. It is by arousing and playing upon deeply rooted fears that the film solicits our acquiescence in the "rightness" of the order which the resolution depicts. The adventure story and the love story are integrated by projecting onto a cultural Other a fantasy of female sexuality as an evil, destructive, archaic power of death. The subordination of this power then becomes the precondition of civilization.

The opening episode in a Shanghai nightclub in 1935 brings together the archaeologist-adventurer Indiana Jones, a showgirl and singer named Willie Scott, and Jones' sidekick, Short Round. The latter is a little Chinese orphan, rescued by Jones from a life of small-time urban crime, who worships his surrogate father and at first treats Willie as a potential rival. Following a rapid series of adventures, the three of them end up in an impoverished village somewhere in Northern India. The villagers are starving, and their dignified headman links his people's plight to the "power of dark night," which has once more arisen in the palace of Pankot. This evil power is embodied in the nefarious Thugs, historically a group of professional assassins. The Thugs have stolen the magic stone of the village, the *Shivalinga*, which is a phallic shaped ritual object representing the god Shiva. The loss of this stone has brought famine upon the village and, to complete the attack on the life-principle, the villagers' children have been kidnapped and enslaved in the palace. Jones agrees to recover the ritual stone for the villagers. He and his companions proceed to the palace, where foul shrines and vampire bats

foreshadow sinister activities. This premonition is swiftly fulfilled at a repulsive banquet attended by various Hindu dignitaries and a visiting British colonial officer.

That same night, immediately after an interrupted sexual encounter with Willie, Jones discovers a secret passageway that leads to a chamber deep below the palace. There they watch the evil priest perform a human sacrifice to the goddess Kali, who represents the destructive manifestations of the Mother Goddess and consort to Shiva. After the sacrifice, Jones seizes the villagers' stone and discovers the abducted village children who are toiling in the palace mines. But Jones and his companions are captured. He is forced to drink the "blood of Kali," which robs him of his soul and enslaves him to the goddess. As a test of his loyalty, Jones is ordered to sacrifice Willie, but in the very nick of time Short Round breaks the evil spell by singeing Jones with a flaming torch. Restored to himself, Jones rescues Willie from the pit of lava over which she is dangling, liberates the children, and leads his companions out of the mines. The final victory over the Thugs takes place high up on a bridge.

The film has the narrative structure of a quest romance, in this case a journey to hell and back again, a move from light into darkness followed by a return to light. The story as a whole thus consists of a bracket around a central part, which is the quest proper. Rhythm and tone together reflect and express the sequential structure of the narrative. As many reviewers have noted, the energetic, action-packed pace and playful humor of the framing sequences contrast sharply with the increasingly oppressive, constricted atmosphere and total absence of comic relief that characterize the film's central sequence. For many reviewers, the film "goes wrong" when it abandons its breakneck, cunningly crafted pacing and loses its sense of humor. Where it is that the film goes remains to be seen.

It is not difficult to detect the film's overt ideological implications. Like one of its models, GUNGA DIN, INDIANA JONES is a cinematic variant on the theme of the "white man's burden." It seeks to represent imperialism as a civilizing, socially progressive force and so to legitimize Western domination of others. It does so by identifying oppression with the indigenous system of rule. For if the suffering of indigenous peoples is the product of their own institutions, then those institutions may be *rightfully* supplanted. Hence the film does not present a blanket condemnation of Indian otherness, but rather it divides that otherness into two categories, which correspond to an oppressed peasantry and an oppressive, exploitative ruling class.

At the same time, the film constructs imperialist and indigenous forms of domination as polar opposites, thereby denying the possibility that these forms might have anything in common. The film unambiguously differentiates "legitimate" from "illegitimate" rule. One way in which it effects this split is by using the gender categories of male and female to express the difference between Western and Indian rulers. This strategy

implicitly weds the film's political content to its psycho-sexual content. It powerfully reinforces the depiction of the white man as the paternalistic defender of justice against oppression and of the civilized order against primordial female chaos.

The film's gender model of political domination places the villagers in the position of children, dependent on the paternal West for protection. Within this framework, the villagers are sympathetically represented, and indeed a sign of Jones status is his interest in their affairs. Jones treats the simple, downtrodden villagers with great courtesy. He is portrayed here as an enlightened man, with a healthy, relativistic respect for alternative cultural traditions, a sort of anthropological Mr. Wizard. He lectures Willie (and indirectly the audience) for recoiling from the unappetizing guest-food, which is all that the starving villagers have to offer. He provides a model of manly conduct for Short Round who politely accepts the food. In these scenes Jones acts as all-knowing scientist, ego ideal for little boys, and champion of helpless villagers, all rolled into one. The paternalistic relation of the white scientist to his object of research underscores the more general paternalism of Jones relation to his needy charges.

The Indian aristocrats, however, are represented as radically alien and monstrously evil. Lucas and Spielberg seek to show how what appears beautiful and gracefully opulent is really hideous and depraved. This tactic partly accounts for the film's loss of pace. Many films use a convention of maintaining a tension between the enemy's refined exterior and his true inner nature, thereby increasing a suspenseful sense of foreboding. Lucas/Spielberg only briefly acknowledge that convention. The Maharaja's Minister who greets Jones and company as they enter the palace seems a cultivated, knowledgeable, Oxford-educated man. Before the assembled guests and dignitaries are seated at the luxuriously appointed table, we get a quick glimpse of an indigenous courtly culture. This is practically the last aesthetically pleasing image that the film offers us. There are musicians, dancers and singers, not to mention Willie herself, who appears bedecked in Indian finery, so radiant that Jones verbally acknowledges her attractiveness for the first time. What is emphasized in this scene is the seductive, alluring, sensual character of Indian court culture with its beauty, charm and graceful opulence.

But these images of the seductive, alluring Other are hastily and irreversibly reversed in the banquet scene. At the table, Jones, the child Maharaja, his Minister, and a visiting British colonel discuss the palace's political history. It had been a center of the murderous Thuggee cult that was later suppressed by the British. Jones is assured that in spite of what the villagers may have told him, the cult no longer exists. Yet in counterpoint to all this talk, we have before us the visual evidence that the bad past has indeed returned. We are bombarded by culinary images of snakes, live eels, beetles, eyeball soup, and monkey brains on the half-skull. Lucas/Spielberg evidently enjoy playing with their food, but the game is not innocent. It evokes our disgust, not only for the feast, but

also for the lascivious pleasure with which the Indians consume the loathsome food. The banquet scene does not so much reveal to us the depravity *behind* exotic sensuality as it impresses upon us the *identity* of sensuality and depravity.

Although the scene may have been designed to be grossly humorous, that humor serves to displace the viewer's attention from the content of the conversation to the vile feast. It had been a conversation that provided at least shreds of material for an historical understanding of the present conflict as a moment in a history of struggle. That sort of understanding becomes implicitly negated by the scene's emphasis on the culinary representation of Otherness. This displacement suggests that the bad past that has returned is not to be understood through discourse and is not interpretable in socio-historical terms. Rather the badness is inherent in the very nature of the Other, a nature that is graphically embodied in the food the Other consumes. Such a depiction implies that historical circumstances are ultimately irrelevant to an understanding of the world. The film presents culturally different forms of resistance and rebellion. But then it does not treat them as socially rooted, intelligible phenomena related to existing forms of exploitation, injustice and social insult. Consistent with a strong tendency in the U.S. today, the film seeks to explain the world in terms of the Other's evil nature rather than in historical terms.

The film subsequently treats depraved sensuality as the sign of the evil emanating from Kali. The bloodthirsty Mother Goddess is depicted as lusting after human flesh and worshipped by adoring throngs of entranced, arm-waving, dehumanized followers. We see the living heart torn from a sacrificial victim who, mysteriously still alive, is then lowered into a whirling pool of lava, accompanied by a crescendo of drum beats and chants. What we suspected at the dinner scene becomes confirmed by the scene of human sacrifice. Indian aristocratic culture is not merely decadent but savagely regressive. And within the Western tradition, an unmistakable sign of that regression is the triumph of the female principle over the male: Shiva, the Lord, has been lain low by the Mother, at whose feet the *linga* now sits.

The scene that unfolds within the Temple of Doom is a lavish amalgamation of countless Hollywood renditions of sinister primitive cults. But this film unmasks the enemy's true nature in a specific way. From sensuous depravity it moves to depicting savage evil. Then it reveals how savagery is manipulated by a brutally oppressive class. The cult leaders have not only impoverished the villages, but they also exploit child labor. The abducted children must toil endlessly in the mines in search of two sacred stones which were hidden from the British. The real goal of this labor is not natural riches but pure power for their masters because the missing stones are the key to having Kali's forces dominate the world.

The narrative construction of the Indian rulers evokes in the viewer a strong desire for their destruction. As the rulers' evil nature is revealed

in ever more hideous terms, expectations arise to see a resolution that absolutely eradicates such absolute evil. This longed for resolution, moreover, would serve social justice by saving the peasants from the tyranny of their lords. Yet the film's representation of that tyranny inadvertently calls attention to another mechanism of ideology production. The images of children working indicate that the film not only represents the Indian ruling classes as negatively alien and other; it also projects onto them attributes of the western ruling classes. Forced child labor on a massive scale has far more to do with 19th century capitalism domestically and 20th century capitalism abroad than with traditional India. Moreover, there is indeed a form of production where the real goal is not the things produced but the abstract social power they embody. Yet that form, the production of surplus value, is not to be found in the mysterious darkness of other cultures but in the light of our own. The film transposes a critique of the capitalist ruling class onto the Indian ruling classes and fuses such a critique with a depiction of the cultural alien's depravity and evil. Its project is to deflect onto the Other that frustration and anger which are domestically engendered. And to project anger in this way has an ideological product. It legitimates imperialism as apparently progressive, as a channel of action and a civilizing mission for the white man who cannot change things at home.

As exploitative rulers, the Indians bear a mystified resemblance to the Western ruling classes. The film, however, goes to great lengths to associate the Indian enemy with femaleness, which is fleetingly depicted as seductive opulence and then, in greater detail, as sensual depravity and primordial chaos. Constituted in opposition to a savage, corrupt, female evil, imperialism appears as a civilizing, purifying, male force. Jones and the British function in the film as bestowers of law, order, and reason upon a helpless peasantry, who are as childlike in their dependency on Western paternalism as in their vulnerability to the evil Mother's forces.

Altogether absent from these representations is any mention of the darker side of imperialist domination. Yet whatever gifts of "civilization" colonial rulers may have bestowed, the motivating force behind imperialist expansion was to exploit colonized societies of their labor, material products and needs. On such matters, the film remains significantly silent.

But then, the film would hardly represent Western exploitation, since the film is itself a form of exploitation. Its vivid portrayal of the Other as a violent and dangerous enemy constitutes a violent and dangerous act. Such a portrayal both reflects and produces conceptions of the world "out there" as the place of evil.

Specific characteristics of the film's self-validating condemnation of the Other point toward a psychosexual dimension of ideological processes. Not unlike many British colonial officers, to judge by their reports, the film seems fixated on the sensual depravity of the feminized Indian rulers, whereas it presents the contrasting masculinity of the Western

civilizers" in a sublimated form. Jones and the British reject perverse sensual pleasure and seek gratification in the moral exercise of power. The psychosexual dynamics here emerge more clearly in the context of the love story.

In many of the older exotic adventure films, the "love interest" is manifestly subsidiary and peripheral to the adventure story, but this is only an apparent structure. INDIANA JONES brings the latent structure of adventure-romance very close to its surface, and so it discloses the psychosexual desires and fears which lie at the very core of the genre.

Other reviewers have called attention to the film's sexist characterization of the heroine. Willie is portrayed as a brainless, whining, incompetent gold-digger, a dumb blonde who contrasts sharply with the spunky heroine of RAIDERS. In our reading, however, the film inadvertently reveals its sexist portrayal of the woman as superficial, a defense against a deeply rooted fear of female sexuality. We have already noted that the temple episode breaks in rhythm and tone with the surrounding sequences, and it elicits a pervasive sense of horror. That horror, we argue below, is structurally conditioned. Its force derives from the thinly masked nature of the quest as a flight from sexuality, which becomes a fantasized encounter with primeval femaleness.

This trajectory is implied at the very beginning of the film in an apparently trivial exchange. When Willie first hears that Jones is an archaeologist, she says,

"Archaeologists — I thought they were funny little men searching for their Mommies."

"That's 'mummies'," Jones snaps and thinks that he has corrected her. Shortly thereafter, he is poisoned, and the vial with the antidote winds up in Willie's bosom. Jones, understandably enough, has no time to waste in supplication. When Willie delays in handing over the precious antidote, he takes it from her by force. Mistaking his state of desperation for passion, she protests that she's not that kind of girl. The scene is playful, yet it sets up the tension between male and female that organizes the entire film. Underlying that tension is a deep ambivalence towards the female. Either the woman appears to the man, as she does in this scene, as a desirable, life-giving figure who, however, must be forcibly subjugated. Or embodied in Kali, she manifests herself as a deadly threat.

This threat informs the love story, with its stereotyped progression from initial antagonism to desire. Jones and Willie do not openly acknowledge their mutual attraction until they have come within the palace, where Willie (whom we first saw emerging from a paper dragon's mouth) is metamorphosed back into an exotic seductress. After the banquet scene, Jones parts company with Short Round and solicitously offers Willie an apple, from which he takes the first bite. Predictably this initiates a sexual encounter, which subsequently founders over the issue

of control. She insists that her aphrodisiac charms will make him forget all other women. He demurs, characterizing himself as a scientific investigator of female sexuality who will not prejudge the results of his research. The outcome is that their mutual desire goes unsatisfied, and he returns to his bedroom.

She has a temper-tantrum, whereas he discharges his frustrated arousal by other means — by engaging in a struggle to the death with an enormous Thug who suddenly appears out of nowhere. Upon disposing of his assailant, Jones rushes into Willie's chamber, apparently to see if any Thugs are molesting her. In the film's terms, she betrays the limitations of her nature in assuming that he has returned to consummate their sexual relationship. Reality and fantasy are here reversed. Willie's assumption that Jones has returned to continue where they had left off is made to appear silly. She fails to comprehend that his desire has been subordinated to the "reality principle," i.e., the struggle with the Thugs who are under every bed. Jones now has more important business than sex. His search of the room leads him to a voluptuous female statue; when he touches its breasts a hidden passageway opens. Willie looks on, puzzled and exasperated, and tries to draw his attention to *her* breasts.

Within the sequential logic of the plot what follows is a direct consequence of Jones' having avoided sex with Willie. After all, had he chosen her breasts over the statue's, the passageway would never have opened. At another level, however, what ensues is a fantasy realization of that sexual encounter, expressed as a nightmarish anxiety dream. The fantasy moves from the erotic to the anti-erotic, from distorted desire to the utter negation of desire. Ultimately, this fantasy realization of sex vindicates the avoidance of sexuality.

Consider first what awaits them in this passageway that opens wide upon his touching the stone breasts. Inside it is not only moist and dank, but teeming with hideous life, millions of insects, creeping and crawling, many-legged things of all shapes and sizes. There is no adventuresome rhythm to this episode. The viewer is not excited or thrilled but almost unbearably disgusted and repelled by the imagery. Lucas and Spielberg follow this scene with an alternative fantasy of the dangers that lurk in dark enclosed places. Jones and Short Round get trapped in a chamber, which promptly starts to close in upon them. Huge spikes emerge from the floor and ceiling, creating the effect of terrible, ravenous jaws, a graphic variant of the common motif of the "toothed vagina."

Disturbing as these images may be, they remain within the bounds of fear of female eroticism. But the passage further inward is also a passage backward, a regression from the woman as seductress to Kali, the primordial mother in whom life and death are merged. Deep below the earth, between the legs of the hideous idol, is a pool of lava with a whirlpool vortex that opens and closes to receive and consume its victims. To return to the womb of Kali is to meet one's death; the "Mommy" has indeed become the "mummy."

When Jones is captured and forced to drink the black blood of Kali, there is a symmetric inversion of his earlier relationship to a female breast (i.e., Willie's). Now the breast is not the object but rather the agent of violence, and the liquid that the man is forced to swallow is not an antidote but a poison. This poison subjugates men to the female, and its cure is phallic.

The dry fire of Short Round's torch, the surrogate son's love of the father, frees Jones from Kali's spell and averts the threat of her wet fire. Gradually now the film reacquires its upbeat, masculine rhythm of adventure and conquest. The return journey has begun, out from darkness and up into the light where proper order is rapidly restored. The evil priest and his followers are defeated by Jones and the British, with a little help from the phallic power of Shiva's *linga*. The stone and the children are restored to the village. Last of all, Jones playfully lashes out with his whip to draw in the outwardly recalcitrant but inwardly yielding Willie as Short Round appears on an elephant which squirts a stream of water at the happy pair. In abruptly shifting to Short Round's perspective, the film reminds us of its overt purpose, to take us back to those childhood years that Spielberg has elsewhere rhapsodically depicted as happy, carefree, and sexless.

What the film presents as its resolution is the reinstitution of the phallocentric Law-of-the-Father, gaily packaged as kid-stuff. Adventure and love, the two apparently independent plotlines, have come to structurally similar resolutions based on domination and submission. The light adventuresome spirit of the beginning and end of the film, together with their carefree sexism and racism, are supposed to be legitimated by the central sequence in the Temple of Doom.

The film itself, however, points to a resolution of a very different nature, a resolution that, while unrealized, is obliquely alluded to by a small, but critical gap in the plot. To locate this absent presence, we must return briefly to the temple, and to the scene in which the entranced Jones prepares to sacrifice Willie. As the moment of doom approaches, the audience anticipates, because of the previous sacrifice, that he will be required to tear out her heart. We know that our hero can do no irreversible evil and so we eagerly await the moment of his release, expecting it to come through the woman. Yet neither Jones nor the priest reaches for her heart, and she is lowered into the pit with her breast untouched. Why? Here at this juncture, where the plot misses a step, the film betrays its ideological project by unintentionally allowing us a glimpse of an alternative resolution.

Jones is saved in the film by phallic fire and boyish solidarity. It is left to us to reconstruct the implications of the unselected path. Breaking the evil spell by touching the woman's breast would have meant overcoming the dominion of Kali by separating the erotic, life-bringing woman from the consuming, death-bringing one, separating desire from death, Eros from Thanatos. This in turn could have been the basis for a radically new masculinity, a masculinity no longer compelled to ally with little

boys, to flee from women in adventures, or to perceive sensuality as depraved. But as the masculinity that is constituted in the film is never transformed. It necessitates the continued phallogentric domination of everything female, and necessitates the exclusion of sensuality. Western civilization's political victory over the Indian ruling class, together with Jones' romantic conquest of Willie stand for the triumph of this undifferentiating form of masculinity over the fantasized threat of the female principle.

By including a latent alternate resolution, the film makes it clear that the values it seeks to legitimate are no longer securely grounded. Those values may once have been taken for granted but not any longer. In spite of itself, the film indicates the impossibility of returning to the past as if the present did not exist. Although the film is compelled to deny the present, its attempted return to the past requires the quasi-violent psychic repression of newer possibilities and sensibilities. What is repressed then reappears in projected form and seems all the more threatening. The inherent instability of such a resolution presages a future return of the repressed, which in turn would have to be denied and rejected all the more strongly. Whatever may be the film's self-understanding, the neo-American "heroic" ideals it clings to are not innocently nostalgic. Rooted as those values are in a sense of threat and vulnerability, they become dangerous in their anachronism. The "newly-won confidence" of Reagan's United States is threadbare. This way back is not the way out.

Latino portrayals in film and television

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On November 16, 1979, NOSOTROS, a Hollywood-based association of Latino actors, held a press conference to protest two CBS Movies of the Week in which Latino gang members figured prominently. While some may consider that NOSOTROS and other Latino groups were over-reacting to gang depictions in the films, *STREETS OF L.A.* and *ACT OF VIOLENCE*, a cursory look at how Latinos have been portrayed, first in Hollywood motion pictures, and then in television and other media, will give insight into how modern media have molded popular perceptions of Latinos and the latent and overt messages given the viewer about Latinos, the kind of people they are and the kind of things they do.

Historically, there have been relatively few portrayals of Latinos of any kind in motion pictures and television, particularly when compared to the population size that Latinos represent and have represented in the United States. A review of some of the films which have portrayed Latinos, Mexicans and Chicanos, reveals a succession of abusive stereotypes and denigrating distortions.

As early as 1908, D. W. Griffith's *THE THREAD OF DESTINY* used the term "greaser" for the Mexican "bandit" type. Later silent films took this portrayal and expanded it in such films as *TONY THE GREASER* (1911) and *THE GREASER'S REVENGE* (1914). At the time when revolutionaries were struggling to free Mexico from the abuses of the Porfirio Diaz tyranny, Hollywood disavowed revolution in Mexico by using Mexican *banditos* as convenient foils to the North American cowboy. With the advent of "talkies," the stereotype remained, although it did go through some modifications — such as that of the *CISCO KID* film series produced during the 1930s and 1940s.

Unlike the traditional Mexican bandit, foul and greasy, the Cisco Kid was a more refined *Californio*, dashing, a kind of Robin Hood type. Yet he was the exception. His sidekick, "Gordito," or "Pancho" in some films, was a weak, bumbling fool. And the Kid often had as adversaries

the greasy bandit types from which the Kid had evolved. The popularity not only of the Cisco Kid, but of the Mexican bandit type in general is reflected in films such as these: CISCO KID AND THE LADY (1940), VIVA CISCO KID (1940), THE GAY CABALLERO (1941), LUCKY CISCO KID (1941), RIDE ON VAQUERO (1941), THE GAY DESPERADO (1935), KING OF THE BANDITS (1947), and BANDIDO (1956).

A second early stereotype was the Latin lover. First popularized by Italian actor Rudolph Valentino, the Latin lover quickly became a film standard, as suggested by these film titles: THE KISSING BANDIT (1948), THE BULLFIGHTER AND THE LADY (1951), and LATIN LOVERS (1953).

A third stereotype was to show Latino men, most often Mexican men, as weak, sleepy peons. Few films elevated this character to a starring role. Rather, the ignorant peon occupied the landscape while the North American cowboy enacted scenes of heroism and gallantry. At best the Mexican peon is the nondescript, cowardly audience for a gunfight, a guitarist playing in the background to a romance by the U.S. protagonists, or more commonly, a target for sharp-shooting cowboys. One wonders how such films as THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN, VIVA MARIA, TWO MULES FOR SISTER SARA, THE WILD BUNCH, BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID, and countless spaghetti westerns, could have been made without the prop of complacent, weak, and illiterate peons whom the heroes could variously rescue, defend, organize, or slaughter-depending on the plot.

Hollywood films have produced equally denigrating portrayals of Mexican and Chicana women. One example is the series of films about the "Mexican Spitfire," films with titles like HOT PEPPER (1933), STRICTLY DYNAMITE (1934), THE GIRL FROM MEXICO (1939), MEXICAN SPITFIRE (1939), MEXICAN SPITFIRE OUT WEST (1940), MEXICAN SPITFIRE'S BABY (1941), MEXICAN SPITFIRE AT SEA (1941), MEXICAN SPITFIRE SEES A GHOST (1942), MEXICAN SPITFIRE'S BLESSED EVENT (1943), and even MEXICAN SPITFIRE'S ELEPHANT (1942). A variant of the Mexican spitfire was Estelita Rodriguez's portrayal of the "Cuban fireball," in such films as THE CUBAN FIREBALL, THE FABULOUS SENORITA, HAVANA ROSE, and TROPICAL HEATWAVE. And another variant was the popular image of Carmen Miranda as a saucy, exotic dancer with fruit-laden hat and fiery temper. Again, the message was the same: the Latin woman represents a hot-blooded temptress obsessed with carnal pleasure.

What these stereotypes of the greasy bandit, the Latin lover, the dumb peon, and the Mexican spitfire all have in common is that they reduce to a one-sided, superficial and exaggerated depiction the real variety and depth and complexity of a struggling people. Significantly, the underlying social issues affecting Latino life in the United States have seldom been addressed in Hollywood films, and hardly ever have Latinos been portrayed as people in control of their lives, capable of standing up for their rights, or having an interest in their own future.

With the notable exception of the film *SALT OF THE EARTH* (1951), the few films that have attempted to deal realistically with the concerns of Mexicans and Chicanos in the United States have mostly displayed a paternalistic, condescending attitude toward Chicanos and their ability to fend for themselves. A few examples will help to illustrate this.

In *BORDERTOWN* (1935), Paul Muni plays a Chicano who returns from law school. Despite his brilliance, he manages to lose his first big case in his hometown along the United States/Mexico border. Failing at being an attorney, he resorts to opening a gambling casino at which he becomes quite successful. Predictably, Hollywood cannot have the Chicano excel in legitimate professional forms, only in the clandestine, seamy side of U.S. society — an area presumably more familiar to Chicanos and Mexicans.

In *THE LAWLESS* (1950), a young Chicano (Lalo Rios) visits a dance that is crashed by a group of wealthy Anglo kids from the good side of town. In the ensuing fight, Lab Rios is arrested; later the police car taking him in overturns, killing the policeman inside, and allowing the Chicano youth to escape. Tempers quickly rise in the town and an ugly mob mood takes over. The Chicano community is powerless to defend its own, and once again he submits to police custody. It takes the publisher of the town newspaper (played by Macdonald Carey) to defend the young Chicano. Despite the fact that a mob destroys his office, Macdonald Carey can enlist the help from the father of one of the boys who originally started the brawl. They get an attorney and Rios is eventually cleared — all through the machinations of the non-Chicanos.

In *THE RING* (1952), Lab Rios returns as a down and out *pachuco*^[1] spotted by a fight promoter after Rios flees from a street brawl. At first he promises to become a great success. He is renamed "Tommy Kansas" by his manager (played by Gerald Mohr). Soon, however, the manager realizes that Tommy Kansas is not champion material and tries unsuccessfully to dissuade Tommy's efforts to hit the big time. Eventually, Tommy Kansas winds up in the ring with boxing champion Art Aragon, is defeated, and resolves to leave the ring forever.

Aside from the fact that Tommy Kansas eventually leaves the ring, the overall message is that he is a loser — even in one of the few fields in which Chicanos have traditionally excelled. The Lalo Rios character is ultimately powerless, albeit a fighter. The film underscores this attitude when Tommy Kansas and his friends are refused service at a restaurant. Rather than protest, the boys decide meekly to leave. A friendly policeman improbably stops by arid, witnessing the incident, forces the waitress to serve the boys. When asked by the policeman if they have this kind of trouble often, Tommy Kansas replies, "Sure, we're Mexican." While realistic in its portrayal of discrimination, once again the film needs an established Anglo authority figure who saves the day.

In *THE TRIAL* (1955), Glenn Ford plays a college law instructor who defends a teenage Chicano (played by Raphael Campos) accused of having killed a well-to-do Anglo girl at a beach party. The girl, suffering

from rheumatic fever, has actually died of a heart attack and young Campos is really innocent. Yet the townspeople are outraged at what they think has happened and attempt to lynch Campos. The plot of the film revolves around how the Communist Party uses the incident to make a *cause celebre* of Campos, and subvert the naive efforts of the Mexican American community. Glenn Ford is enticed into defending Campos by a communist attorney (played by Arthur Kennedy) and eventually discovers and foils the plot by the nefarious communists to misuse the sentiments of the well-intentioned Mexican-American community. Here again, the film portrays the Chicano as the dupe. The Mexican-American community becomes an easy pawn to the communists and only an Anglo can see through it all. That the Mexican-American community might conceivably be in sympathy with communist objectives is, of course, never seriously broached.

Although not treated as a major theme in the film, *GIANT* (1956) did include significant attention to prejudice and discrimination of Mexicans. A subplot of the film deals with the mixed marriage between Jordy Benedict (played by Dennis Hopper) and Juana (a Chicana played by Elsa Cardenas) and shows what happens in Texas society when the couple breaks the unwritten law against mixed marriage. Bick Benedict (Rock Hudson), Jordy's headstrong father, has typical racist attitudes toward Mexicans and must finally confront his racism at the conclusion of the film when he is forced to defend his Mexican daughter-in-law and grandson against a restaurant proprietor who has refused them service. This altercation comes after the restaurant owner has also refused service to an elderly Mexican couple to whose defense Bick Benedict has come. While it may be argued that showing an Anglo helping out a Mexican couple in trouble is positive, it may also have underscored the opinion that Mexicans are inherently servile, humble, ignorant and powerless. Despite countless historical incidences in which Texas Mexicans have stood up for their rights, in *GIANT* they must once again await help from well-intentioned saviors of the dominant society.

While the films mentioned have tried to deal with substantive issues sympathetically, they often missed the mark. One may speculate that this was not due to malicious intent, but merely reflected subtle and unconscious prejudices on the part of writers and producers. The extent of producer bias is more evident in the inherent scorn and ridicule of Latinos in such films as *VIVA MAX* (1970), in which Mexicans try hopelessly to recapture the Alamo in modern times; in *BANANAS* (1971), in which every cliché and stereotype of the banana republic is again trotted out on the screen; or in many episodes of the *CHICO AND THE MAN* television series.

In recent years Latino youthful gang members have emerged in film as updated, modern variants of the Mexican bandit type. National Latino organizations and spokespersons have protested films such as *BOULEVARD NIGHTS*, *WALK PROUD*, *STREETS OF L.A.*, and *ACT OF VIOLENCE* because of the way these films emphasize criminal rivalry between Chicano gang members and because they depict average

Americans, sympathetically portrayed, being terrorized by these young criminals.

Criticism of *BOULEVARD NIGHTS* (1979) centered on the perception that "... the distorted images portrayed in this movie are, in fact, destructive to the Chicano community."[\[2\]](#) The executive producer of the film, Tony Bill, defended the film saying,

"This might very well be a controversial film; I hope this film humanizes people who are otherwise thought of as being from another planet."[\[3\]](#)

Yet Chicano criticism charged that

"... by neglecting the causes of gang violence as well as the work of community agencies and groups in ending barrio warfare, the viewer is bombarded with another stereotype of the Chicano experience."[\[4\]](#)

The film *WALK PROUD* (1979) was similarly criticized for its excessive emphasis on gang violence and because the lead role was played by an Anglo actor (Robbie Benson) who had to wear brown contact lenses in order to even look Chicano.[\[5\]](#) Although completed in 1979, the film was released only in areas without large Latino populations and has yet to be released in Los Angeles for fear of public outcry.

STREETS OF L.A. (1979) and *ACT OF VIOLENCE* (1979), two CBS Movies of the Week, were assailed by *NOSOTROS*, which threatened a national boycott of General Electric, sponsor of the film *STREETS OF L.A.* The Chicano Cinema Coalition similarly viewed the film *ACT OF VIOLENCE* as "an act of psychological violence on the Chicano community, pornographic, without socially redeeming significance."[\[6\]](#) Sadly, these four films represent the bulk of films produced in recent years dealing with Chicano or Latino themes.

TELEVISION INHERITS THE STEREOTYPES

The 1977 report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, entitled *WINDOW DRESSING ON THE SET: WOMEN AND MINORITIES IN TELEVISION*, makes the following observation about the role of television in molding public opinion:

"Audiences place a higher value on television as a source of information and entertainment than on other media ... Television does more than simply entertain or provide news about major events of the day. It confers status on those individuals and groups it selects for placement in the public eye, telling the viewer who and what is important to know about. Those who are made visible through television become worthy of attention and concern; those whom television ignores remain invisible." [Page 1]

With the emergence of situation comedies, westerns and cops and robbers programming on television, stereotypic renderings of Latino types were borrowed from motion pictures and incorporated into a variety of television programs. Thus, for example, the comic Mexican buffoon stereotype portrayed early on by Chris Pin Martin as "Pancho" in the CISCO KID film series, evolved into such characterizations as "Pepino" in THE REAL McCoy's television series; Sgt. Garcia in the ZORRO series; and more recently "Chico" in the CHICO AND THE MAN television series.

In similar fashion other Latino stereotypes were brought into television. The Mexican bandit and docile peon became familiar parts of the Southwestern U.S. landscape in television series such as WYATT EARP, CHEYENNE, GUNSMOKE, THE RIFLEMAN, or WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE. The Latino criminal emerged in his own right as perhaps the single most common type of Latino in police series such as IRONSIDE, POLICE STORY, KOJACK, STARKY AND HUTCH, MOD SQUAD and others.

The foregoing analysis is corroborated in a study by the Communications Department of Michigan State University on "Mexican Americans — The New Minority on Television" (1979). Researchers Bradley Greenberg and Pilar Baptista Fernandez examined 255 separate television episodes during a typical week of programming in each of three television seasons, 1975-76, 1976-77, and 1977-78. Out of some 3,549 characters identified, only 53 could be reliably classified as Hispanic, amounting to about 1.5%.[\[7\]](#)

Of the 53 Hispanic characterizations in the Michigan State University study, about a quarter — the single largest grouping — were bandits, thieves and other criminal types. Another quarter was cast in lowly occupational roles such as car washers, waiters, handymen, construction workers, and the like. Only three characters (restaurant owners) could be considered in the category of "professionals and managers."

Of the 53 characters, 22 were cast in "comic" roles, the most popular being the late Freddie Prinze characterization of Chico Rodriguez in CHICO AND THE MAN. Of the remaining 31 roles, 22 were "serious" characterizations as either law-breakers or law-enforcers ("Ponch" in the CHIPS series). In summary, the study found that,

"... there emerged from this three major role characterizations — the funny Hispanic, the crooked Hispanic and the Hispanic cop."[\[8\]](#)

COMMERCIALS AND ADVERTISING: STEREOTYPES CONTINUE

In a classic study on "How Advertisers Promote Racism" (1969), Dr. Tomas Martinez notes that in addition to the instrumental purpose of advertising (i.e., selling a product), there is a second purpose to advertising which he describes as symbolic. In the case of many advertisements in which Latinos have been featured, Dr. Martinez found

that these advertisements

"symbolically reaffirm the inferior social status of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the eyes of the audience.

Exaggerated Mexican racial and cultural characteristics, together with some outright misconceptions concerning the way of life, symbolically suggest to the audience that such people are comical, lazy and thieving." [9]

While not necessarily the prime intent of such advertising, Dr. Martinez analyzed how many ads by major American firms have served to reinforce traditional stereotypic notions of Mexicans and Latinos that we have previously seen emerge from motion pictures and television. Dr. Martinez gives a partial listing of some of these advertisements of the late sixties that depicted Latinos in negative ways.

PROMOTING RACISM: A PARTIAL LISTING

THE SPONSOR — THE MEDIUM — THE MESSAGE

- *Granny Goose* shows a fat Mexican toting guns, ammunition — with the message that Mexicans are overweight, carry deadly weapons.
- *Frito-Lay* uses the character Frito Bandito implying that Mexicans are sneaky and thieves.
- *Liggett & Meyers* shows a character "Paco," who never "feenishes" anything, not even revolution. The ad implies that Mexicans are too lazy to improve themselves.
- *A. J. Reynolds* depicts a Mexican *bandito*, with the stereotype of the Mexican bandit.
- *Camel cigarettes* depict a "typical" Mexican village, all sleeping or bored, with the implication that Mexicans are do-nothings, irresponsible.
- *General Motors* has an ad in which a white, rustic man holds three Mexicans at gunpoint, implying that Mexicans should be and can be arrested by a superior white man.
- *Lark (Liggett & Meyers)* shows a Mexican house painter covered with paint, implying that Mexicans are sloppy workers, undependable.
- *Philco-Ford* shows a Mexican sleeping next to TV set, implying Mexicans are always sleeping.
- *Frigidaire* shows Mexican *banditos* interested in a freezer, implying Mexicans are thieves, seeking Anglo artifacts.
- *Arrid* depicts a Mexican *bandito* who sprays underarm as a voice-over says, "If it works for him, it will work for you." The ad implies that Mexicans are the onew who stink the most.

As can be seen from this partial listing, stereotypes that originated in

motion pictures persist and negatively reinforce attitudes about what Latinos and Mexicans are and what they can do. Apart from the offensive nature of these depictions, one must look further and question how these images affect the public's perceptions of Latinos. Indeed, one might wonder to what extent social, economic and political inequities that exist with respect to Latinos in U.S. society are not maintained and furthered by these popular misconceptions of Latinos which mass media have created and continue to sustain.

There are no studies that conclusively relate societal stereotypes of Latinos with this group's socio-economic inequality. Certainly class and race inequities are based on structures beyond media images, yet it is not hard to imagine employers, co-workers, teachers, government officials and others perceiving Latinos in ways partially taught to them by media, thus reinforcing inequities.

Indeed, one need look no further than the film and television industry itself to see patterns of employment discrimination that may be fueled by employers' imagined stereotypes. Concurrent with the rise of Latino media activist groups in the late 1960s, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission issued a report in 1969, which found that only 3% of the work force at major Hollywood studios were Latinos — "Spanish surnamed." Similarly, at the three major television networks in Los Angeles (ABC, NBC, and CBS), of a total work force of some 3,495 employees, only 76 persons (about 2%) were Spanish-surnamed — in a city whose Spanish-surnamed population was 20%.

A more recent study by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (*Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, 1977) found that in a sample of 40 television stations, including owned and operated stations of the three major networks and public broadcasting, employment of Latinos increased from 1971 to 1975 from 2.0% to 3.3%, still far below the proportion of Latinos in the general population of some 9%.

It is not surprising that Latinos are depicted in stereotypic negative ways by the mass media when they are also denied access to positions of employment where they might help to produce more realistic and humanistic portrayals of themselves.

Because there has been little research conducted with respect to the portrayal of Latinos in Spanish-language films, television and advertising, this review does not address this sphere at length. However, in the absence of any authoritative studies in this area, a few observations may be ventured.

It is probably safe to assume that some cross-over influence from U.S. films, television and advertising will have penetrated programming originating in Mexico and other Latin American countries (the source of the bulk of Spanish-language programming broadcast or screened in the United States to Spanish-speaking audiences). For instance, in Mexican westerns, it is not uncommon to find the image of the Mexican bandit,

peon, or even a typically "loose" woman. Also, in the much watched Mexican *telenovelas* (soap operas), many of the stereotypes we have seen evolve from Hollywood may occur from time to time. However, an important difference must be noted. In all of these programs, whether films or television, the *protagonists* as well as the antagonists are Latino or Mexican. Thus, a *Mexican* hero compensates for the negative image of the Mexican bandit. While there may be an occasional temptress portrayed, we also see positive images of Mexican career women, mothers, wives and women in many occupational roles. The audience then receives a picture of Latino good guys, as well as good guys. Moreover, Latino characterizations, because they are written, produced and directed by Latinos, are less likely to abound with specifically Anglo misconceptions.

With respect to the treatment of Chicano themes in Mexican films, a preliminary survey suggests that a growing number of Mexican films are being produced which deal specifically with the Chicano and the so-called "undocumented" Mexican worker in the United States. This trend began as early as 1954 with the Mexican film ESPALDAS MOJADAS (WETBACKS), which presented the love story between an undocumented Mexican field worker and a Chicana. More recent Mexican films have also addressed Chicano realities in the United States, films such as CHICANO (1976), HERMANOS DEL VIENTO (1976), RAICES DE SANGRE (1977), LOS MOJADOS (1978), LA ILLEGAL (1979), AL OTRO LADO DEL PUENTE (1979), and MOJADO POWER (1980), to name but a few. A study analyzing Latino portrayals in Mexican films, *telenovelas* and variety shows, outside the parameters of this report, would be greatly illuminating.

This brief historical overview may appear to indicate little hope for positive media portrayals of Latinos in English-language film, television and advertising. Yet, several recent items point to better possibilities prompted by sound economic incentives:

- A random check of some of the companies mentioned in the report by Dr. Tomas Martinez shows that many of these companies have, in fact, modified their advertising policies in an effort to reach rather than alienate Latino markets. The Frito Lay company, for example, has undertaken an ad campaign utilizing Mexican personality Fernando Escandon to promote their "Tostitos" tortilla product. The result has been a great success: \$140 million dollars in 1980 alone.

- The 19 million-plus Latinos in the United States represent an estimated \$40 billion a year in spending power.[\[10\]](#)

- Major product companies such as Gillette, Coors, Schlitz, Nestle, McDonalds, and many others have taken aggressive promotional campaigns in both English and Spanish language vying for this market.[\[11\]](#)

- Los Angeles and other major cities have seen a proliferation of Spanish-language television, radio, and cable television stations directed

at the Latino audience.

— It is projected that the Latino population will be the largest minority group in the United States by the year 1990, causing many authorities to declare the 1980s, "The Decade of the Hispanic."[\[12\]](#)

With all of this attention to the Latino, it is unlikely that totally negative stereotypes will continue to be fostered (or tolerated) when they are dysfunctional to potential profit gains by advertiser and broadcaster alike. Latinos are coming to realize the kind of economic and political clout they represent. The threatened national boycott of G.E. products by NOSOTROS is only one example of how Latinos may be able to make their sentiments known to producers, programmers and advertisers alike.

Undoing the aftereffects of decades of pejorative stereotypes will take time. A first step toward this goal can be aggressive hiring policies for Latinos in media. As well as sensitivity to Latino portrayals by media executives and advertisers. The fundamental shift to positive portrayals will come when Latinos themselves write, produce and direct films, television programs and advertising which realistically portrays their lives and lifestyles.

Notes

[1.](#) "Pachuco" is the name given to Chicano youth during the 1940's. The Chicanos dressed in zoot suits and were often the object of ridicule and discrimination.

[2.](#) *El Popo*, April/May, 1979; University of California at Northridge, California.

[3.](#) *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1979.

[4.](#) *El Popo*, *ibid.*

[5.](#) *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 1978.

[6.](#) *Variety*, November 16, 1979.

[7.](#) As with motion pictures, Latinos are significantly under-represented in television when compared to their presence in the general population. 53 characters out of 3,549 represents less than 1.5% of television characters; the Latino population in the United States is about 19 million or about 9% of the total U.S. population. George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli conducted a 1979 study of Hispanic characterizations for the earlier period of 1970-76. Their study found that of 11,080 characters only 277 or about 1.5% were Hispanics. Thus, there appears to be a reduction in Hispanic roles in recent years.

[8.](#) *Mexican Americans — The New Minority on Television* by Bradley Greenberg and Pilar Baptista Fernandez, Michigan State University Press, 1979.

[9.](#) "How Advertisers Promote Racism," Tomas Martinez, *Civil Rights Digest*, Fall, 1969. Table reprinted with permission of T. Martinez.

[10.](#) *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1980.

[11.](#) *Ad Week*, February 9, 1981.

[12.](#) *Time*, October 16, 1978.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Inside Prime Time Knee deep in the big muddy

by Elayne Rapping

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Inside Prime Time, Todd Gitlin, Pantheon, 369 pp., \$16.95.

Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*, a study of the workings of network prime time television, has caused quite a stir among mainstream and left-liberal media critics. Barbara Long in the January/February 1984 issue of *Channels* magazine writes,

It's been done before, but never in an operation with such impressive credentials or on a scale this ambitious."

The book received a full-page favorable review in the December 31, 1983, issue of *TV Guide*, too. And Pat Aufderheide, in a review printed in the October 28, 1983, issue of the *Village Voice*, and then reprinted in the independent socialist weekly, *In These Times*, could hardly contain her enthusiasm:

"Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* may be the best book we get — certainly its the best we have yet — on the business and culture of prime time programming."

Jacket blurbs, from such notable left-liberal cultural types as Ed Asner and Susan Sontag (an admitted "nonwatcher" of television), are full of hyperbole: invaluable, "fascinating," "the best book on television around."

This is high praise indeed, some of it deserved. But it says more about the state of U.S intellectuals' thinking about mass culture than it does about the book itself. Closely read, *Inside Prime Time* reveals assumptions and biases about mass culture that, while typical of many left thinkers, have many serious flaws. The book's class perspective, understanding of the ideological aspects of popular drama, and assumptions about how it affects readers are woefully inadequate, to say the least.

It is by now a cliché — and a less than useful one — to speak of television, and popular culture generally, as beneath contempt. Since the 1950s we have been hearing about the "vast wasteland" of television, with its sole purpose of selling products. It is, therefore, surprising that *Inside Prime Time* has received its most glowing praise for reiterating just these points. Both *TV Guide* and *Channels* quote Gitlin's statement that TV is "inert, derivative, cardboard ... [But] good enough for its purposes." Aufderheide quotes further from the same passage, in which Gitlin explains those purposes: "to assemble maximum numbers of people in their living rooms and keep them minimally diverted." She further agrees with Gitlin's judgment that "the vision of the world that TV delivers is anti-political," although "its consequences are not." Why? Because, she says, this "debased prime time product doesn't just occupy space, it prevents other"-and here she uses Gitlin's language — "more intelligent, complicated, true, beautiful and public-spirited" programming to emerge.

There are several assumptions running through all these critical commentaries. Never mind, for the moment, that words such as "complicated, true, beautiful" are vague at best and point to elitist values at worst. The real kicker is that Gitlin and his admirers view home TV audiences as mindless, passive sponges, who sit in a trance, accepting and absorbing whatever passes before their eyes.

The truth is far more complex and interesting. There is no question, of course, that commercial TV exists, first and foremost, to sell capitalist products and values. As any number of media analysts have shown,

"The capitalist media have as their primary aim the realization and distribution of private profit on invested capital and this visibly affects their major [programming] policies."[\[1\]](#)

For this reason, artistic and social values do not play a primary role in network programming decisions.

But that is not the same as saying that audiences will sit still for, much less buy, anything that comes their way. The rapid turnovers and shiftings of prime time schedules, often in a single season, attest to the fact that network executives and sponsors spend a lot of time looking for shows with "the right stuff." Spin-offs and copies of hit formulae — which Gitlin sees as the bulk of TV fare — are not generally as successful as their models because, in fact, it is not as easy to hook viewers as Gitlin thinks.

Before critiquing the book itself, then, it makes sense to examine some of its implicit theories and frame what, in my view, is a more adequate perspective on the subject. It is simplistic to view TV programming as the mindless pablum Gitlin describes. TV shows, and popular culture generally, are not "anti-political." They are a form of social propaganda that aims to sell "the good life," promising to fulfill real human needs and desires within the political and social context of capitalism. But

capitalism inherently makes such fulfillment impossible. Popular culture — when it works — offers viewers a vision of life in the U.S. which seems to fulfill our needs for love, community, freedom, justice — in short, the things promised us by the rhetoric of bourgeois democracy. In the process, popular culture delivers seriously distorted images of capitalism, human nature, and other things. It projects values onto objects and actions that, in truth, cannot possibly provide them. In the words of the well-known advertisement, it "promises us anything, but gives us Arpege" (on credit and at high interest rates).

The way in which this system works has been particularly well described by Raymond Williams, in his writings on the Gramscian concept of *hegemony*. Hegemony, says Williams, is "a central, effective, dominant system of meanings and values" which "constitute a sense of reality for most people." But it is not, he goes on, "in any sense a static system." Rather, "it is continually active and adjusting ... more substantial and flexible than any abstract imposed ideology." Finally, says Williams,

"We have to recognize the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture."[\[2\]](#)

To give a specific example of this process, we might look at the long-lived popularity of daytime soap operas. Far from being the mindlessly idiotic junk which many would have us believe, soaps are among the more sophisticated and flexible forms of popular culture. While never compromising their implicitly reactionary ideological thrust (pro-capitalist, pro-nuclear family, pro-law and order), they have managed over the years to incorporate a host of new, somewhat progressive attitudes into their scripts. In recent years, themes such as extramarital sex, women struggling in the world of work, lesbianism, and interracial relations have been treated in surprisingly positive ways. Rape, wife abuse, and incest have also been presented on many shows from a clearly feminist perspective.

But, at the same time, soaps still by and large present the same distorted view of capitalism and its leaders as they always have. Men — particularly men of power and wealth — are seen as infinitely supportive of women and primarily concerned with personal life. Communities are unbelievably tightly knit. Support systems spanning generations and classes exist for anyone in trouble. Characters are generally "good" or "bad." And their moral status has no relation to class backgrounds. In fact, "bad" characters miraculously transform into "good" ones at the whim of the writers and producers. Overall, soaps present a fantasy vision of life under capitalism which fulfills the dreams of most women viewers. And they do it by distorting the realities of social, sexual and emotional relations in the system in which we live.

Gitlin expresses none of this complexity and contradiction in his book. And the main reason for this failure, I think, is his implicit class

perspective. He presents his entire study, not from the point of view of audience responses or network executives' political values, but instead from the point of view of the writers and producers who create the stuff. Gitlin's style is engaging. He has not written in the traditional scholarly mode. With funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, Gitlin spent the better part of two years (1980-82) hanging out at the studios. He interviewed over 200 executives, directors, producers, agents and actors. He read successive versions of scripts, sat in at tapings, and generally internalized the feel, the mindset and the values of the people he spoke with. Gitlin is a University of California sociologist and former leader of Students for a Democratic Society (an influential New Left organization of the 1960s). His "one of the guys" approach to the "vast wasteland" may, therefore, seem a bit surprising. But much of what he learned turns out to be fascinating.

The most interesting chapters record and explain the workings of the networks in simple clear language. In "The Deal Is the Art Form," for example, Gitlin provides a lively, detailed picture of the prime time world. Images of "new white Jaguars," sporting plates with such legends as "TEN PER," winding down Beverly Drive, are combined with some of the clearest explanations you'll get of how, for example, the breakdown of the old studio system led to the current method of "one shot deals," in which agents, rather than writers and producers call the shots. He shows how, as "the powerful people gravitate toward each other and make their deals," as economic considerations take precedence over character development, plausible plot lines and social themes. He explains with equal clarity how the ratings systems work, detailing the process by which the need to "deliver audiences to sponsors" leads to the tendency to create endless spin-offs and copies of previous successes.

If you want to know how TV gets to be TV, you couldn't do better than Gitlin. But if you want to know what it really means socially and politically, you almost couldn't do worse. Yet the insider's view that makes Gitlin's descriptions of the light and shade, the nuance and detail, so believable is fraught with analytical peril. There is really nothing new about the meaning of it all in what Gitlin tells us, after all. He simply confirms and elaborates on a well-known fact about commercial TV: it's meant to sell products, not create art. But by sinking so deeply into the mindset of the "creative" people whom he so clearly enjoys, he inevitably presents his material and his analysis from their point of view — from their class perspective, to be accurate. And that is a serious error.

The men and women Gitlin listens to so sympathetically are in fact the very people Lawrence Kasdan presented with equal sympathy in the film *THE BIG CHILL*. They are, for the most part, former political and social activists, or at least idealists, who came to TV to try to "say something meaningful" to a mass audience and ended by feeling cynical, self-pitying and used. The image of the progressive, idealistic artist up against the stupid old network executives dominates the book. There is, for example, Gary David Goldberg, who "was a child of the sixties ... who

with his lover ... started the Organic Nursery Center in Berkeley" before moving to the more real, sullied world of TV writing. And, oh boy, did he get burned. Did he learn his lesson? Did he leave? It's a question that doesn't come up. Gitlin never even flirts with the idea that these people might have options, might be responsible for their own choices. Many equally talented people live on shoestrings, while working in alternative media. There are even people within the industry who are joining with their non-professional colleagues to organize for some measure of political control. That such options never occur to a leftist writer is odd.

This identification with a "creative community" which is, after all, a very well-paid segment of the petit-bourgeoisie, would be no more than irritating, if it didn't seriously hamper Gitlin's analytical work. One goes to a movie like *THE BIG CHILL* primarily to be entertained. But ones goes to an analysis of prime time TV to be educated. The media, as Gitlin himself showed in his earlier book, *The Whole World Is Watching*, is an important political institution. But in order to see why, you must stand back from the experience of its producers, and their self-serving biases, and see it in larger terms.

In fact, what Gitlin conveyed in his earlier book is all but forgotten or denied here. "In liberal capitalist societies," he had written, "no institution is devoid of hegemonic functions." He had asserted,

"The media are controlled by members of top corporate and political elites and by individuals they attempt (with varying degrees of success) to bring into their social and ideological worlds."

He then explained how such "individuals" are entrusted with formulating and setting the limits on the media version of reality, in a word, and with enforcing ideological hegemony. They are talented, clever and very well paid for their services and willingness to participate in "complex class alliances,"[\[3\]](#) he wrote in earlier works.

Gitlin does not merely leave such analysis out of his new book because he is writing for a popular audience. Instead, he actually contradicts and denies that earlier analysis. This is nowhere more evident than in the passage quoted most approvingly by mainstream critics. TV, says Gitlin, to the delight, in particular, of *TV Guide*, is "simply bad ... because no one with clout cares enough to make it otherwise."

This is absurd. Any number of Gitlin's own examples, if interpreted according to his earlier theories, tend to show that what Gitlin calls "bad" in esthetic terms is, in fact, politically reactionary, and deliberately so. Is it really because "Nielsen employees are loath to tread into the ghettos" that the ratings don't reflect minority and poor viewers' opinions? Or is it rather an obvious and rational decision on the part of the networks to focus on white, suburban viewers, because they are the primary consumers of sponsors' products? Or, to use another example, is it really an "accident" that TV producers tend invariably to reduce social and political issues to "little human condition stories"? Or

is it rather that this focus on the personal is a built-in staple of commercial TV to fit the consumerist bent of the medium, for example? Narrowly defined "personal" stories divert attention away from the larger social and political forces that inform our lives. Such a political focus, Gitlin attests, makes the networks and sponsors very nervous.

That Gitlin's pals in Hollywood don't think politically is not an interesting little quirk. It's a requirement of their jobs. Gitlin himself knows, for example, that "fully one-half of prime time television is scripted by 10% of the Writers Guild's 3000 members." He knows that all TV folk "breathe the same cultural air," attend "the same parties" read "the same maazines" (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*) and get their views of, say, campus life from their own Ivy League offspring. He even knows that most TV living rooms, whether MAUDE's or CHARLIE'S ANGELS', are furnished with the same expensive, stylish consumer ware — the same stuff pushed in commercials and found, in fact, in the homes of the TV crowd. And yet, he fails to draw the obvious conclusion: that this in itself is a reflection of their class positions and alliances.

My use of such Marxist terminology would surely draw Gitlin's ire. He is at pains to ridicule all leftist "conspiracy theories" of why TV is bad. "The networks," he insists, "are not trying to indoctrinate the helpless masses." Like so many liberal critics of the Vietnam war, Gitlin wants to blame the problems of television production on stupidity and bureaucratic bumbling. But this is a cop out. Gitlin can only make it seem plausible because his view of fictional programming is so politically myopic. Where, in *The Whole World Is Watching*, he found "ideological framing" everywhere in network news, when it comes to drama, he sees almost no ideological content at all.

Errors in his thinking on the matter — with their roots in a bourgeois class perspective — are most blatant and annoying in his lengthy discussion of HILL STREET BLUES, the darling of liberal media critics. To Gitlin this show is living proof that TV producers are capable of "high quality," even popular "high quality," and that it is only the idiocy of the executives that keeps such programing off the air. "In May of 1981," he tells us, ABC executives, believing that Reagan was "touching the patriotic impulse" and that audiences wanted "heroes," created the conservative STRIKE FORCE. That show bombed, however, while HILL STREET BLUES, which Gitlin describes as a "mature and even brilliant show" which put forth an occasional "radical" perspective, was a hit.

But was HILL STREET BLUES really more progressive than STRIKE FORCE? Gitlin quotes the show's producers, admitting that it put forth a worldview in which "there is very little illusion about things ever getting better" and that "social movements" have no place "in the show's conception of heroism." In fact, from a left perspective, HILL STREET BLUES is not all that different from STRIKE FORCE in its political values and messages. Both present the cop as hero, manipulate their audiences to identify and sympathize with the plight of the cop rather than the "criminal" or other community residents, and present the

problem of "crime" itself as a given, an inevitable and unchanging fact of human nature and modern society.

The fact that Gitlin fails to see the ideological underpinnings of such shows raises questions about his political and critical commitments. What Gitlin most admires in the show is its style — its "high density, nervous energy and look of controlled chaos" which, he says, were previously "alien to commercial TV." But these stylistic techniques are linked to very specific political attitudes. The show "raised unanswerable questions" for its producers. These same producers consider themselves "unfashionably liberal" and Gitlin agrees. *HILL STREET BLUES* "worked," he says, "because it immersed itself ... in the energy of American liberal-middle-class ideology turned on itself, at a loss for direction." It portrayed the "hopes of the sixties" gone sour. Some characters were even given "a radical past" and a "1980's disillusionment" to go with it. Gitlin's love of the show seems to reflect his own identification with just such attitudes.

Such love of "post-liberal cynicism" may seem a far cry politically from the idealistic distortions of daytime soaps. But, in fact, these two distortions are only two sides of the same coin. Soap operas present fantasies in which capitalism fulfills all our human needs, while shows like *HILL STREET BLUES* present the darker side of that same fantasy, excusing capitalism for not making our dreams come true. Capitalism ultimately fails, not because it's a bad system, but because human nature is simply incapable of realizing its Jeffersonian dreams. A similar worldview is present in such popular nighttime soaps as *DALLAS* and *DYNASTY*. Here, too, we are presented with a cynical view of human nature, which rationalizes the inequities and evils of capitalism and its class system. Just as Capt. Furillo is presented as the best the system can produce, so is Krystle Carrington. The end result of all such shows is to leave the viewer feeling that "you can't change human nature" and sympathizing and identifying with the best of a bad lot of options, rather than questioning the system itself.

Even Gitlin's view of the failure of *STRIKE FORCE* as a sign of the U.S. audience's repudiation of reaction in favor of liberalism is off base. In fact, the highly successful *THE A-TEAM* about a gang of Vietnam vets, who solve crimes and help the downtrodden through acts of outrageously campy, and macho, derring do, attests to that. *THE A-TEAM* is every bit as reactionary as anything on TV, but its heroes and style — in contrast to the very old-fashioned *STRIKE FORCE* are ever so hip and trendy. And their actions — again in contrast to *STRIKE FORCE* — are outside of, and often in defiance of, traditional law enforcement agencies. Thus audiences have their cake and eat it, too. The message on *THE A-TEAM* is ultra-reactionary, but the heroes do defy the bureaucratic, generally corrupt state institutions that most viewers already mistrust and resent, and that's their apparent appeal to Gitlin.

But Gitlin's propensity to ignore complex and contradictory ideological messages is a major problem with the book. So is his palsy-walsy

acceptance of what the writers and producers present to him as their "idealistic" intentions. For one thing, this shows that what he, and they, most admire are not the most progressive things on prime time. In fact, the occasional made-for-TV movie — Lee Grant's *A MATTER OF SEX*, about the successful strike of eight female bank clerks — are often far more progressive than any current series. These movies may lack the stylistic innovation Gitlin so admires, but they do occasionally present images of oppressed people engaging in collective, successful struggles against corporate and state institutions. The fact that they are "one shot deals" may explain the networks' willingness to run them from time to time.

These progressive examples bring us back to the question of hegemony, of the way in which the dominant culture does in fact allow occasional alternative values and visions to be aired, while placing primary emphasis on reinforcing the dominant values and setting clear limits on alternative visions.

Gitlin doesn't understand this TV dynamic, again because of his "insider's view" of TV, as its creators see it. He pays far too much attention to insiders' "idealistic" intentions and far too little to the actual experience of watching TV and to the institution as a whole. The dangers in this approach are articulated very well by John Berger. He writes in *Ways of Seeing* about the advertising industry:

"Publicity has an important social function. The fact that this function has not been planned as a purpose by those who make and use publicity in no way lessens its significance. Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy."[\[4\]](#)

What Berger says about publicity could and has been said of popular culture generally. It offers its own distorted vision of what is possible, and emotionally and socially fulfilling, as a substitute for truly meaningful solutions to the very real emotional and political problems of its audiences. That those who are paid to perform this sleight of hand aren't aware of it, or are unwilling to admit it, should not be surprising. It is the job of leftist media critics to cut through this class myopia and reveal the political and social forces behind the self-serving rhetoric. That Gitlin buys this rhetoric and sinks so deeply into it makes his book itself a part of the mass political confusion about the role of the media.

The success of this book with industry personnel and critics alike, speaks to the enormous need for more serious, politically astute studies of television and its ideological underpinnings. A public that watches an average of seven hours of TV a day is a public in need of critical guidelines and insights into the workings of this powerful medium, from board room to cutting room. Indeed, if Gitlin's book tells us anything, it is that the glamour and seductiveness of network TV, and the world in which it is produced, is far greater — even to some leftists — than most of us have perhaps been willing to admit. For that reason alone, it demands our serious attention.

Notes

[1.](#) Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 30.

[2.](#) Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 38-39.

[3.](#) Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), p. 254.

[4.](#) John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York, Penguin, 1977), p. 149.

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Conflict and contradiction in the mass media

by Michael Selig

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By now it is a truism to claim that television programs and motion pictures have come quite a way in taking on controversial topics. Undoubtedly, series like ALL IN THE FAMILY and MARY HARTMAN, mini-series like ROOTS, and the motion pictures of the last ten years have attempted to come to grips with some of the major social, political, and economic issues of advanced industrial capitalism: class, racial and sexual conflict, corporate irresponsibility, and the waging of imperialistic wars, to name a few. It's a far cry from FATHER KNOWS BEST to MARY HARTMAN, from LEAVE IT TO BEAVER to FAMILY TIES, from AMOS 'N ANDY to ROOTS, from THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES to APOCALYPSE NOW, and from Disney's THE THREE CABALLEROS to MISSING. Media criticism often notes these changes, attempts to account for them, and then either proclaims halcyon days for alternative media's content or decries commercial media's inevitable distortions of bourgeois society's contradictions.

In either case, the commercial mass media provide expression for some new ideas and alternative ways of thinking. And manipulation theories developed from Frankfurt School criticism seem more and more anachronistic. Although many critics on the left still approach the commercial mass media as primarily deterministic, univocal, and all-embracing in the media's worldview,^[1] most recent radical criticism attempts to account for the contradictions and conflicts that have become increasingly apparent as the media develop their own history. The left journal *Tabloid* makes such an approach clear in its editorial policy:

"The artifact of mass culture is not so smooth and seamless as manipulation theory would have us believe, like a sheer and polished rock face that allows for no scrambling; to the contrary, it is a rough, irregular surface, with fissures that enable one to find footholds."^[2]

Over the last ten years of media criticism, it has become increasingly obvious that the commercial mass media are riddled with conflicts and contradictions at a number of levels. These contradictions exist not only in program content but also in the organization of corporate production, in the nature of the viewing experience, and in the media's social and political functions. Some critics view these contradictions in a positive light, discovering within them moments where ideas are expressed seemingly in opposition to the ruling elite's political and social ideologies.^[3] Other critics note the media's developing sensitivity to ideological issues but criticize the issues' conventional, sensationalistic treatment which ultimately misrepresents real social and political conflicts.^[4] One side emphasizes the potential for, and sometime realization of, the expression of alternative social and political ideas. The other emphasizes the limitations that set boundaries to expressing alternative worldviews. In either case, to analyze these contradictions — in the mass media's content, organization of production, viewing experience, and social functions — will help us trace both the mass media's potential or expressing alternative political ideas and the limits to such expressions.^[5]

FORMS OF CONTENT

In "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," Douglas Kellner writes,

"Images and narratives of American television contain contradictory messages, reproducing the conflicts of advanced capitalist society and ideology. Against leftist manipulation theories which solely stress television's role as a purveyor of bourgeois ideology, I will argue that the images and messages of American television are contradictory both in their content and in their effects."^[6]

Through thumbnail analysis of a few programs, Kellner demonstrates that television has often criticized capitalist industry (the mini-series WHEELS), imperialist wars (FRIENDLY FIRE), and individual representatives of big business and government (SIXTY MINUTES). Kellner further argues that these narrative conventions are "emancipatory, ... enlightening, ... leading to a transformation of thought and behavior."^[7] Against manipulation theories, Kellner's argument more capably notes the complexity of the relationship between mass media products and "advanced capitalist society and ideology." But that argument ultimately denies the power certain narrative and stylistic structures have to set limits on the representation of ideological contradictions and alternative worldviews.

In contrast to Kellner, Todd Gitlin notes that the contradictions inherent in bourgeois ideology become expressed only insofar as the program can structure the contradictions in a manner consistent with conventional narrative forms and/or documentary presentation, or what he calls "the dominant system of discourse."^[8] Gitlin traces such formal limits as they work on a level relatively specific to television, But these limits to

the mass media's narrative presentation of social conflict and ideological contradictions characterize classical narrative forms in general — specifically the nineteenth century novel[9] and melodrama.[10] Almost all storytelling in the commercial mass media follows narrative patterns established by these previous art forms, patterns which determine the exposition of conflicts and contradictions.

Two conventions of classical narratives set especially important limits on expressing alternative ideological viewpoints. First, to delineate good and evil as individual character traits limits the possible exposition of social conditions and processes. That is, it limits a radical, or even specifically Marxist, rendering of social and political institutions.[11] Heroism and villainy become primarily a function of the drama's fictional personalities' specific, individual characteristics, rather than the product of social relations and material forces. To individuate evil and villainy thus mitigates a radical social critique. Production relations and social relations in general cannot be depicted as the determining factor in individual or collective suffering.

CHINA SYNDROME, for example, emphasizes individual characters and dramatic conflicts, as in conventional narrative forms. Therefore, a critique of nuclear power based on vested economic interests, inadequate regulation, contractor malfeasance, and, most importantly, on improper waste disposal, is displaced by a more dramatic problem, meltdown. Beyond that, the film resolves the nuclear issue through Jane Fonda's newfound success and prestige as an investigative reporter, and the individual characters' courage when their self-interest and their lives are at stake.

Second, to employ a closed narrative form, whereby all problems and contradictions become resolved by the end of the story, is to deny the ongoing, dialectical nature of social conflict. Most characteristically, problems inherent in a specific set of social relations [12] become progressively individualized throughout the story's development. Thus, the story may contrive a resolution which satisfies the individual protagonist(s)' conditions while ignoring the problem's ongoing existence in an advanced industrial social order.

Costa-Gavras' MISSING, for example, briefly considers the social, political, and ethical problems created by U.S. financial interests in Latin America. But finally the film emphasizes the individual characters' (movie stars Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek) quest for information concerning a missing U.S. citizen. Even though the missing North American's death is unquestionably blamed on U.S. interventionist foreign policy, the film's closing offers the conventional pleasure associated with film's providing an answer (the U.S. citizen is dead), but without referring to the continuance of similar foreign policy decisions.[13] Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek have solved their individual problem. Through the structures of a "closed" narrative form, an illusory resolution to "our Latin American problem" seems to follow.

SOCIAL USE AND FORMS OF CONTENT

Up to this point, I have considered the mass media's limits expressing alternative ideologies only in light of narrative content. However, other limiting factors more specifically apply to particular media and their social use, especially as regards the news and fiction on commercial television.

A number of organizational as well as ideological structures set limits on how commercial television communicates local and world events. Todd Gitlin discusses at length the ideological constraints on television news, tracing them to both historical and economic determinations. According to Gitlin, the credibility of the news is intimately linked with its development in a period of scientific enlightenment.

"The processional insistence that objective journalism is desirable, and that objective determinations of newsworthiness are possible, arose during the nineteenth century, albeit fitfully, as part of the sweeping intellectual movement toward scientific detachment and the culture-wide separation of fact from value."[\[14\]](#)

This ideological determination, however, functions within the limits set by the news media's inherent ties with corporate capitalism. A business itself, the news media legitimates industrial capitalism, the system it depends on for advertising revenue. It questions only individual violations of the core processes of business, never the system itself.[\[15\]](#) Thus, an ideology of objectivity, coupled with the news media's inherent interest in a growing business environment, forms a particularly forceful and repetitive pattern of offering seemingly truthful information supportive of corporate capitalism.

In *News from Nowhere*, Edward Jay Epstein deals with the internal and organizational, rather than external and ideological, limits on broadcast news.

"Network news is shaped and constrained by certain structures ... such as government regulation of broadcasting and economic realities of networks; certain uniform procedures for filtering and evaluating information and reaching decisions; and certain practices of recruiting newsmen and producers who hold, or accept, values that are consistent with organizational needs."[\[16\]](#)

Government regulation of broadcasting is of two types: one directly imposed by the Federal Communications Commission, the other indirectly imposed by individuals in public service or political office. FCC regulations are far too numerous and complex to recount here,[\[17\]](#) beyond mentioning the obvious. For example, the Fairness Doctrine forces broadcasters to provide equal time for alternate views to the station's — all of which ultimately functions to limit broadcasters' willingness to become embroiled in controversy.[\[18\]](#) Indirectly, access to individuals in government and business often becomes determined by

their continually favorable treatment in the news. Representatives of the news media critical of particular individuals, businesses or government agencies often find that their sources for information will no longer cooperate.

The economic realities' affect both the decision-making processes in choosing stories and recruiting personnel. Epstein discusses at length the procedure for recruiting newscasters, reporters, and producers without a strong ideological bias. Weeding out the radical fringe, whether from the right or the left, alleviates the problems of censoring stories written from an obvious political bias. It also permits the interchangeability of personnel and the division of labor (few news reporters are experts and few cover a regular beat). The news' geographical balance is also strongly determined by economics. Camera crews and correspondents stay based in a few U.S. and European cities (except in extreme circumstances). Thus, for non-mandatory stories, the news comes from cities like New York, Washington, Los Angeles, and Chicago, not San Antonio or Santa Fe. Foreign news comes from the Middle East, European capitals, and the Soviet Union. Coverage of the Third World is necessitated only when the U.S. has an interest in a governmental crisis or revolution. Finally, the network news documentary is often pre-sold to advertisers to ensure sponsorship. That means that a possible sponsor accepts or rejects a documentary at the development stage. This has obvious consequences for the treatment of controversial subjects.[\[19\]](#)

As regards television fiction, commercial television ultimately must be distinguished from commercial film and non-commercial TV, insofar as television's *social* use further limits the development of alternative world-views. Whereas most analyses of television programs ignore the medium's use as a vehicle for commerce, this function in particular crucially affects television entertainment's ideological limitations. Each show must somehow integrate itself into television's continuous and seamless commercial flow, with profound effects on both fictional narrative structure and the program's setting.[\[20\]](#)

Most obviously, stories get limited to thirty or sixty minutes in most cases. Further, they are broken down in approximately fifteen-minute segments, each with its own climax and resolution. Also, the desire to maximize profits through minimizing production costs manifests itself in "industrial" methods of production. This encourages repeating protagonists and surroundings within TV series. As such, a worldview develops in series in which "good" (i.e., the central character) continually triumphs over "evil," and in which the material conditions of life continue unchanged from week to week. Further, the settings of most programs reproduce a middle-class, consumerist lifestyle that echoes those promises of social and personal utopia offered by the commercials' images of commodity gratification.[\[21\]](#) As a consequence, programs striving to depict working-class settings and problems have often found resistance from the media's corporate structures (e.g., PLAYHOUSE 90, ALL IN THE FAMILY, SKAG), as are programs which

question the value of consumerism (e.g., MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN) or which develop social conflicts as irresolvable (e.g., LOU GRANT).

HEGEMONY AND THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE

Until recently, left media criticism rarely dealt with the viewing experience. As a consequence, most radical criticism wholly accepts the media as a purveyor of a monolithic bourgeois ideology that becomes imprinted without resistance in the spectator's worldview. Yet ideology is not so simply monolithic nor the viewer so passive.

Both assumptions depend on analyzing historically specific circumstances involving the development of mass communications and an industrial labor force. The "hypodermic needle" theory of communications assumes that the receiver offers no resistance to a message. Such theory partly comes from an analysis of the conditions surrounding the development of propaganda techniques during World War II. Writers in the Frankfurt School offered this notion to explain the mobilization of national populations behind various fascist regimes. They further buttressed their notion of a "passive" receiver by offering assumptions about cultural production and entertainment in advanced industrial capitalism.

With the development of industrial modes of production and the workers' alienation from the products of their labor, a social concept of leisure time developed in which the worker would presumably be free from the debilitating effects of the job. A whole set of profitable activities were, in fact, promoted in response to workers' increasing time away from the workplace. In particular, a new set of cultural entrepreneurs and cultural enterprises arose that were aimed at the working classes (e.g., spectator sports, motion pictures, and broadcasting). As a consequence, "entertainment" has developed in a context where its relationship to work has been viewed as complementary. Thus it is often viewed as tangential to the continued functioning of society. While "art," the other major cultural activity socially viewed as separate from productive labor, remains accepted as the evocation of society's ethical and moral values, leisure and the popular arts are seen merely as distractions from the activities of the work day, as ways to relax.

Three questions become crucial to investigating the process of viewing: How monolithic is the viewing experience? In other words, do we all get the same message from a program or film? Can the viewer actively (re)interpret media messages? And what are the limits to an active (re)interpretation of media content? It should be obvious to anyone who's attended a film or watched a TV program in a group that the number of interpretations are virtually as numerous as the viewers. Television and film are often a popular topic for "cocktail conversation" especially because of the controversy engendered by different and often mutually exclusive "readings" of a program or film. Even a simple reconstruction of the events in a program often shows considerable

variation from viewer to viewer.

These variations, however, come as a by-product of the processes of selective attention and perception, processes mostly determined by a viewer's previous life experiences and their relationship to the show's content. Such variations rarely occur as the result of an intended, active reinterpretation of media content. Recently, however, leftist critics and scholars have begun to recoup bourgeois media products through active reinterpretation.^[22] This critical project emphasizes the disguised ideological contradictions of bourgeois capitalism inherent in a show's dramatic conflicts (including the conflicts in news "stories"). It also unmasks the narrative mechanisms for resolving ideological contradictions in the final resolution and happy ending. As such, recent criticism by the left has demonstrated various methods for actively reading bourgeois media content in a manner not necessarily supportive of the media's own manifest ideology.

Nevertheless, adversary readings of media products have limits. These limits can be investigated on two levels: one appropriate to the viewing of media products within a context of leisure and passivity, and one appropriate to the context of the critic and scholar's heightened awareness regarding media messages. Recently, the notion of *hegemony*^[23] has entered leftist media criticism (in response to the inadequacy of the "hypodermic needle" approach) as a way of explaining the sway the media hold over the culture's ideologies even within a non-monolithic viewing experience. As Julia Lesage has pointed out, the hegemonic processes of advanced industrial capitalism operate at many levels of society to limit conceived choices and alternatives in order to perpetuate a bourgeois social order founded on principles of freedom.

"The concept of hegemony [is] most useful if seen as operating in two interrelated and mutually reinforcing spheres, the institutional and the psychological. That the group in power, the dominant class, has the power to write history and impose norms because it controls and directs the economic, state, cultural, scientific, religious, educational, etc. institutions ... If one way of considering hegemony is in terms of institutional compulsion or the way our choices are structured by institutions, another way is to examine the ways that our very desires and emotions often lead us to choose or settle for mainstream ideas about what our life ... should be. The narrative arts ... set out scenarios of what our choices, contradictions, and conflicts are — and it is often hard for us to imagine rewriting those scenarios on entirely different terms."^[24]

In other words, the hegemonic process in the narrative arts functions at its most basic level by legitimating certain social and cultural contradictions through the structures of dramatic conflict. But these contradictions become limited in their presentation in order to "define" liberty as a function of apparently limitless, but assuredly limited

choices. Julia Lesage notes that in many Hollywood films an "hegemonic female fantasy" exists which, in a movie like *AN UNMARRIED WOMAN*, assures that any choice of lifestyle and social mores not commensurate with patriarchal ideologies (e.g., lesbianism) becomes negated through a variety of narrative and cinematic devices which represent these choices as somehow unpleasant or unsatisfying.^[25] The democratic concept of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" remains manifested at its most fundamental level in this formal structure of choice — whether in the narrative arts (e.g., choosing between two dramatically opposed lifestyles), in the news coverage of the political sphere (where you are encouraged to vote for one of two major party candidates), or in the commercial's presentation of a consumerist lifestyle (where you are encouraged to choose from a variety of brand names).

The critic and scholar face limits to critical reinterpretation that are less specifically formal and ideological, but instead personal and epistemological. Norman Holland and Leona Sherman offer some criteria for understanding the limits to any individual reading of a "text." Though they are specifically discussing gothic novels, their ideas also well apply to readings of media content.

"Each [reader] creates a uniquely individual experience from these ... materials. Yet ... novels offer the material for certain kinds of experiences and not others. Each [reader] has the human freedom to ignore the text, critics, common sense, and everything else ... yet psychological laws say each [reader] creates an experience within his own identity or character."^[26]

Ultimately, then, each media product or text offers only a limited number of possible interpretations. Each individual interpretation depends on the conjunction of the viewer's life experiences with the possibilities offered by the film or TV program. For the critic, these life experiences include training in the particular methods which one chooses for the analysis of texts. And these methods are determined by a less-than-neutral academic community and/or the economic marketplace — both of which prefer the non-controversial. The possible choice of critical methods is limited as well by the methods' inherent dependence on the epistemological foundations of one's particular culture and historical epoch — that is, by the criteria established through institutions of learning and by one's tools for analysis, which determine what is accepted as "knowledge" and what isn't.^[27] Criticism and analysis are determined then not by the need to supply fundamental truths about a text but rather by the dominance of certain methodologies and their analytical juxtaposition against an individual text.

HEGEMONY AND SOCIAL USE

In "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," Hans Enzensberger notes that the mass media contradict their manifest support of bourgeois

ideology and the economic and social status quo because they disrupt the "cultural monopoly" of the educated classes and inherited traditions of bourgeois Art.

"The new media are oriented towards action, not contemplation; towards the present, not tradition. Their attitude to time is completely opposed to that of bourgeois culture, which aspires to possession, that is, to extension in time, best of all, to eternity. The media produce no objects that can be hoarded and auctioned. They do away completely with 'intellectual property' and liquidate the 'heritage,' that is to say the class-specific handing-on of nonmaterial culture."[\[28\]](#)

Yet these potentially emancipatory attributes of the media remain merely "potential." This derives from three specific factors of the media's social use. Most prominently, in advanced industrial states common attitudes towards the media mitigate against any fundamental changes in "intellectual property" and bourgeois culture. As discussed previously, the commercial mass media developed within the context of other leisure time activities, while the traditional Arts continued to be validated as the manifestation of the culture's moral and ethical fiber.[\[29\]](#) As such, different and exclusive uses have characterized the mass media and the traditional bourgeois Arts, and continue to do so. Their co-existence seems certain until their social uses change — or are forced to change by a revolutionary situation.

The separation of the production of media products from their consumption further reinforces bourgeois social use of the media. The production and dissemination of media products remains dominated by the social and economic elite. As such, the elite can maintain a distinction between the media's social function as leisure and bourgeois Art's function as Culture. Furthermore, media's economic and administrative structures subordinate producing media products to generating profits. To demand a mass audience limits the potential for formal experimentation and oppositional ideologies, as well as access to media production by those without the necessary capital investment.

The bourgeois use of the mass media becomes further reified by the mass media's development within a historical period enchanted with the idea of exactly reproducing and documenting visual phenomena. During the Renaissance, an obsession with logic and science[\[30\]](#) encouraged the development of a visual perspective that geometrically reproduced the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane. During the period of bourgeois enlightenment, these conventions of Renaissance perspective dominated the visual arts in the West, including in the nineteenth century, the engineering of photographic equipment, and especially the grinding of lenses.[\[31\]](#) As the mechanical reproduction of visual phenomena became feasible, one of the major uses of photography and the cinema was visually to document as accurately as possible the complex events of developing urban industrial

environments. Thus, the use of the media to recreate a complex, "realistic" visual world stands as inherent in the equipment's very engineering as well as in its historical precedents. Consequently, the equipment's use to recreate such a complex, "realistic" visual world has dominated the production of media content. Uses of the media that contradict this process of re-creating a "realistic" visual world became relegated to the fringes of mass-mediated culture, denied access to the dominant channels for production and especially for dissemination (e.g., the work done by later Godard, experimental filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, and videofreex).

CONCLUSION

Approaches that assume that the commercial mass media and its products function in a manner singularly supportive of the ideological status quo (e.g., manipulation theories) ignore the complexity of the hegemonic processes that contain the inherent contradictions in both bourgeois ideology and the mass media. Media content has responded over time to changes in the social climate, including an assumed liberalization of the commercial mass media. Yet, the economic, social, and formal structures which characterize the media limit its potential for expressing truly alternative or oppositional ideologies, even within the area opened up by the contradictions inherent in the mass media themselves,

Rather than proclaiming the values of "liberalizing" the mass media, or denouncing its continued support of capitalist ideologies, left media critics should recognize the hegemonic, institutional structures and procedures that limit how commercial, mass, narrative arts will represent the conflicts intrinsic to bourgeois social relations. Rather than concentrating on evaluating individual media programs, left media critics should analyze the encompassing institutional framework and historical antecedents for particular social uses of the media. Rather than voicing support for the specific program or film which seems to open up the rare possibility of a truly radical critique of social relations, left media critics should concentrate on the potential strategies that undercut the hegemonic control of media institutions, or on general narrative and artistic methods that disrupt the channeling of the spectator's desires into ideologically acceptable, choices. Rather than viewing any individual media program as atomistic, distinct, and potentially emancipatory, the left media critic needs to analyze it as a product of a complex of historical forces — of dramatic and narrative conventions, of specific economic and organizational structures, of conventional attitudes toward viewing, and even of long-term cultural developments — forces which invariably limit the expression of any truly alternative worldview. Finally, left media critics need to recognize that all communication is historically determined, dependent on cultural conventions, and thus subject to the limits of tradition.

Notes

[1.](#) See, for example, Herbert Schiller, *The Mind Managers* (Boston:

Beacon Press, 1974.), and the summary of early left media criticism in Daniel Ben-Horin, "Television Without Tears: An Outline of a Socialist Approach to Popular Television," *Socialist Revolution*, 35 (September-October 1977), pp. 9-11.

2. The *Tabloid* Collective, "On/Against Mass Culture Theory," *Tabloid*, 1, No. 1-2 (1980), p. 11,

3. See, for example, Douglas Kellner, "TV, Ideology and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *Socialist Review*, 45 (May-June 1979), pp. 13-53.

4. See, for example, Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment," *Social Problems*, 26, No. 3 (February 1979), pp. 251-266,

5. This approach should avoid analogical notions that certain structures determine a behaviorist reaction (see Gitlin), but instead show how structures determine the limits for ideological expression.

6. Kellner, p. 13.

7. Kellner, p. n30.

8. Gitlin, p. 251.

9. Janet Bergstrom, "Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: An Interview with Raymond Bellour," *Camera Obscura*, 3-4 (Summer 1979), pp. 71-103,

10. See John Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), and A. Nicholas Vardac, *From Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (New York: B. Blom, 1968).

11. In specifically Marxist terms, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), p. 41.

12. Extremely prominent in capitalist cultural production and bourgeois ideology is the irresolvable conflict between individual desire and social order.

13. Cf., Costa Gavras' *STATE OF SIEGE*, a non-Hollywood production, which avoids excessive reliance on individual heroics and pat answers. The film's closing shows yet another U.S. "technician" (i.e., torture and intelligence expert) entering the country, implying a continuation of U.S. foreign policy initiatives without the pleasure associated with a resolution to the film's conflicts.

14. Todd Gitlin, "News as Ideology and Contested Area: Toward a Theory of Hegemony, Crisis, and Opposition," *Socialist Review*, 48 (November-December 1979), p. 28,

[15.](#) Gitlin, "News as Ideology," p. 39. Gitlin quotes Walter Cronkite:

"Newspapers, broadcasting outlets and networks survive on the advertising revenues that come from business. Journalism can thrive only so long as the business community remains healthy enough to provide these funds. Business, on the other hand, depends upon journalism to foster its own growth — through the dissemination of information through news and advertising."

[16.](#) Edward J. Epstein, *News from Nowhere: Television and the News* (New York: Random House, 1973), p, 43.

[17.](#) A thorough investigation of FCC procedures and day-to-day functioning can be found in Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

[18.](#) Cole and Oettinger. Also, the minimal standards set by the FCC for public affairs programming do little to encourage broadcasters to respond to community needs. The review procedure itself is riddled with loopholes — e.g., religious programming is considered "public affairs programming," and the time of broadcast is not considered relevant to the review.

[19.](#) Truly controversial network television documentaries can almost be counted on one hand — e.g., HARVEST OF SHAME, GUNS OF AUTUMN, THE SELLING OF THE PENTAGON; they are the often-discussed exceptions to the rule. See Alan Rosenthal, *The Documentary Conscience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

[20.](#) See Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).

[21.](#) Police dramas and some situation comedies (e.g., LAVERNE AND SHIRLEY) have been set in lower class surroundings. In the former, areas of urban poverty most often house the socially maladjusted. In the latter, the comic situations often center around the characters' desires for a consumerist lifestyle.

[22.](#) In cinema studies, this work is well exemplified by Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism," reprinted in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 22-30. It continues most prominently in feminist "readings against the grain." See E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), and Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," *New German Critique*, 23 (1981), pp. 27-43.

[23.](#) Hegemony is a term in Marxist theory first used by Antonio Gramsci to specify the manner whereby the dominant class in a society perpetuates the validity of its ideology through persuasion in contrast to coercion, See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Q.

Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, eds. (New York: International Publishers, 1971),

[24.](#) Julia Lesage, "The Hegemonic Female Fantasy as Seen in AN UNMARRIED WOMAN," paper delivered at Lolita Raclin Rogers Feminist Film Conference, November 15, 1980), p. 1, reprinted in *Film Reader*, 5 (1982), pp. 83-94,

[25.](#) Lesage, pp. 85-90.

[26.](#) Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," *New Literary History*, 7 (Winter 1977), p. 281.

[27.](#) See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). On page 91, Foucault writes that the

"episteme may be suspected of being something like a world-view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape ..."

[28.](#) Hans Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, trans. Michael Roloff (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 105-6,

[29.](#) See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 32-35.

[30.](#) Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cummings (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 3-43. Also see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970).

[31.](#) See Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly*, 28, No. 2 (.1974-75), pp. 39-47.

The politics of sexual representation

by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage

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Introduction to special section on sexual representation

Opening a forum

— Chuck Kleinhans

Within JUMP CUT, we've faced problems trying to develop a discussion of pornography and other sexual images. While we have a long history of publishing feminist criticism, and have published pioneering work on women and violence (JC 14), gay men and film (JC 16), lesbians and film (JC 24/25), and women and representation (JC 29), there has been no consensus among the editorial board about issues of sexual representation. A few issues back (JC 26) we published several pieces on women and pornography: an introduction to the issues by Julia Lesage, Valerie Miner on the pornography industry, an analysis by Lesage of the classic D.W. Griffith film, *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*, and an annotated bibliography by Gina Marchetti. We hoped that that section would initiate further discussion, and we anticipate that the material in this and the following issue about representing sexuality, pornography, and sexist images will continue and expand the discussion.

At the same time, we're acutely aware of problems at this point in trying to discuss sexual representation. Recently, the feminist movement has divided sharply on questions of sexuality. In particular, a strongly dissenting mixture of women defend their "politically incorrect" sexuality (such as swinging, casual sex, and lesbian sadomasochism) against what they see as a puritanical "good girl" mentality in the feminist anti-pornography movement. The anti-porn movement itself has decisively altered direction in the past two years.

From an emphasis on education and traditional pressure group tactics, it has turned to pushing for local censorship ordinances, most notably in Minneapolis where such a law was co-authored by feminist lawyer and scholar Catherine MacKinnon, best known for her pioneering work on

on-the-job sexual harassment of women, and Andrea Dworkin, outspoken lecturer, speaker and author of *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Although their model ordinance did not pass, a similar law passed in Indianapolis and was challenged immediately by the American Civil Liberties Union. Anti-porn forces have geared up for a strategy of passing censorship legislation in likely communities. Feminists have not been unified in supporting this strategy. Many see it as diverting political energy away from more pressing issues which women must confront in the Reagan era. Others have pointed out that police and prosecutors can and probably will use censorship laws against gays, feminists and other progressive people, and particularly against feminist and gay bookstores, film and video screenings, and publications.

The debate around these issues has been explosive and antagonistic. Yet we think it is important to present and discuss the range of issues in JUMP CUT. Understanding sexual representation is necessary for more general critiques of advertising, television, and Hollywood film. And exploring new forms of sexual image-making is often a major focus of alternative media practices in avant-garde art and feminist and gay media work. For cultural workers in particular, these issues remain a pressing concern in our ongoing work.

As difficult as it may be to carry on a productive dialogue around these concerns, we think it essential to try. At times we've had difficulty putting together this section. One point of contention among the staff deserves specific mention. In considering the photos which accompany Tom Waugh's article on gay vs. straight pornography, some controversy surfaced within the editorial board. The mere presentation of erect penises offends some of our editors-not because of prudishness, but because the penis-as-sign inevitably signifies male sexual power, and this power carries a threat to many women. The power relations behind such an image are an integral part of U.S. culture today, and feminist anger at images that connote male sexual power cannot be ignored or put aside. Our decision to print the pictures includes an understanding of the potential shock they carry for some readers. At the same time, precisely because the photos demonstrated points in the article, which describes a frequently hidden, ignored, or unknown minority sexual culture, we thought they were appropriate and helpful for understanding Waugh's arguments.

But the decision to print the photos does not resolve the tension. Such difficult contradictions pervade considerations of pornography at this point in time. Discussions around these issues are often explosive, with the participants struggling around definitions and first principles, when they get beyond the frequent phenomenon of simply not accurately hearing what the other person is saying. Yet for media workers, the topic is a crucial one, and we hope to establish a forum in JUMP CUT where the complexity of these issues can be explored productively.

Thus we decided to bring together in this issue several articles by gay

media activists because they present an analysis of gay male sexual images that have not been previously presented outside of the gay press. Richard Dyer examines the romantic narrative structure of gay male features. Tom Waugh develops an extensive comparison of gay male and heterosexual male commercial porn films and discusses Curt McDowell's documentary of his fantasies in *LOADS*. John Greyson looks at gay personal video as self-expression and exploration. As these analyses demonstrate, many assumptions about pornography in the current discussion reflect a limited view based on visual material directed at heterosexual men. By broadening the terrain of investigation, unexamined assumptions about male and female, straight and gay representations are open to examination.

Continuing the discussion, Lisa DiCaprio considers *NOT A LOVE STORY*'s historical impact on today's pornography controversy, and she contrasts the film's use of stripper Linda Lee Tracy with *CHICKEN RANCH*'s presentation of Nevada prostitutes.

In our next issue we will be running articles which extend the dialogue. German feminist Gertrud Koch will analyze the history of film pornography and its relation to the male unconscious. Continuing our long-standing interest in Jean-Luc Godard, critic James Roy MacBean will deal with *EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF*. An interview with several porn stars will discuss women in the industry. And several articles will analyze films which show women taking an active stance against sexual assault: Marco Starr Boyjian looks at *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*. Patricia Erens examines *THE SEDUCTION*. John Jakitis treats Gaylon Emerzian's independent film *GIVING WAY*, and Gina Marchetti analyzes the Philippine martial arts action film *FIRECRACKER*. Tom Waugh's bibliography on pornography will update and expand one we ran in *JC 26*. Additional articles are in various stages of writing and editing and will also be forthcoming.

In editing this and future material on sexual representation, we have as a goal that our editors, writers and readers consider the range of issues and the different political analyses and sensibilities involved while advancing the discussion. We hope other writers and our readers will contribute to the dialogue, and we encourage new articles and letters in response.

The politics of sexual representation

— Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage

Over the past five years, issues of sexual representation, particularly around commercial pornography, have raised major questions for media workers and feminists. Why these matters have now become crucial must be seen in the development of feminism itself. The resurgence of feminism in the late 60s occurred within a larger movement for change that also had dealt with personal and sexual concerns. Yet, only as the autonomous women's movement confronted a series of organizing

issues and its own theoretical evolution was it able to clarify its analysis of sexual oppression. In the U.S. and Europe, women collectively faced, analyzed and debated issues of abortion and reproductive rights, rape, incest, battering, workplace harassment, appearance and dress. Consequently, women developed organizing strategies and tactics to deal with problems in these areas. A kind of clearing and separating of issues relating to sexuality and sexual oppression occurred. This was a necessary precondition to the later clarification of issues around sexual practices and the emergence of an active movement within feminism combating pornography.

Feminist writers have offered an extensive critique of pornography and of the visual representation of women in mass culture, ranging from music videos to TV commercials. Politically, such a critique rests on many (even most) women's recognition that commercial pornography stands as a visual index of women's oppression in contemporary society. It marks as a visual sign, the existence of a rape culture — that is, a situation in which most women and girls fear the frequent possibility of sexual assault and shape their behavior in relation to that danger.

Many women reject pornography for its social presence. Porn bookstores, magazine racks, and theaters stand as a visual expression of male dominance of public space. Men's access to sexually explicit material for arousal indicates a social structure that limits and oppresses women. Commercial pornography is men's turf. It not only obsessively repeats male sexual fantasies, often misogynist, it also reinforces more generalized male heterosexual privilege to express and define sexuality. Men have the right to express sexuality publicly, and this is a major way that women are constrained, harassed and put down. Sexual power-plays in the social sphere range from the boss' putting his hand on the secretary's hip to the factory owner's demanding sex from undocumented women workers to the police's raping prostitutes.

On a more subtle level, but on the same continuum, men's stares, comments, and making women react on the street are everyday actions by which men emotionally "prove" their right to move through public space in a way that women cannot. Women and girls, especially adolescents, regularly have to deal with men's aggressive looks and words on the street. Because of these street hassles, mothers of girls often become particularly enraged at pornography as a visible marker of misogynist, threatening sexuality.

Because of this identification of commercial pornography with male social and sexual privilege, many women also reject gay male pornography, sold on the same magazine racks as heterosexual porn in many cases, or seen in movie theaters in urban gay ghettos just like heterosexual porn films. Gay men have male privilege in public space, especially when they hide their homosexuality. But the open expression of gay male sexuality is narrowly limited. It occurs on the street only in ghettos in anonymous urban areas. Even there, openly gay men are subject to gay bashing and are not protected (in fact, they are often

harassed) by the law. Gay men do not bear direct responsibility for women's street hassles. But gay men do have social privilege and access to the streets, especially at night, which women do not have. For broad social reasons, gay pornography's development and its importance to many gay men has no parallel in the women's movement.

This lack of a women's pornography has much to do with the relation between social sexual organization, and in particular with women's limited access to expressing their sexuality openly. The whole social discourse around sexuality functions to constrain women in the public sphere.

The feminist critique of pornography has decisively changed the commonplace left-liberal assumption that the struggle against the puritan legacy of U.S. life was inherently and automatically progressive and has remained so. While sexual conservatism and censorship have been oppressive within North American culture, the liberal sexual freedom argument has also frequently silenced women and trivialized their fear and rage at rape culture because such an argument ridicules and dismisses many women's gut reaction to pornography.

The analytic background of the feminist anti-pornography position develops in a series of books. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) presents a major re-evaluation of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer by examining the specifically male, and often misogynist, nature of their literary fantasies. She also analyzes how Freud's ideas were used socially to buttress sexist assumptions about the nature of men and women. Millett's book, which remains a classic discussion of sexism in fictional narrative, gave the women's movement a powerful argument against the prevailing artistic and intellectual celebration of male sexual fantasy as inherently liberating. Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) added to the evolving discussion by dealing with sexual assault as social fact and as "mass psychology." By stressing the universality of rape and how cultures reinforce it, Brownmiller provided an intellectual basis for the then-emergent feminist, rape prevention and intervention movement.

Kathleen Barry's *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979) documented women's victimization by force and threat. She drew connections between kidnapping, rape, forced prostitution, incest, coercion, and wife battering, and included a chapter on "Pornography: The Ideology of Cultural Sadism." The first national feminist conference on pornography was held in 1979 and brought attention to the issue and to the efforts of several local groups who had been organizing against abusive images of women in advertising, rock record album jackets, and commercial films. Summing up the practical experience of such organizing and the theoretical discussion of feminist thinkers, Laura Lederer's anthology, *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (1980), gave a broad introduction to the feminist anti-pornography position, which was elaborated in turn by Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (1981) and Andrea Dworkin's

Pornography: Men Possessing Women (1981). Various slide shows of sexist images of women provided the major educational tool of the anti-pornography movement until the timely arrival of Bonnie Klein's documentary film, *NOT A LOVE STORY*, which had extensive runs in many cities and which serves as a standard classroom and organizing tool. In the past two years, the women in the movement have increasingly turned their efforts to pass local censorship laws against porno theaters and bookstores.

As extensive and well-publicized as the feminist anti-pornography position is, it has faced significant criticism from within the broader feminist movement. This criticism usually also acknowledges the misogynist intent of most sexual representation in our culture, particularly in images combining sexuality and violence. But it takes issue with the anti-porn position, particularly in the understanding of sexuality itself.

In the past decade and a half, feminism has developed a very full and elaborate analysis of sexual oppression — of how the social construction of gender and sexuality systematically exploits women. At the same time, feminism has not developed a theory of sexuality. In the absence of a satisfactory understanding of human sexuality, current strategies and tactics around oppressive sexual representations remain inadequate to face the problems they are trying to confront. This is obvious when these strategies simply invoke a norm of "politically correct" sexuality.

Such a concept of sexuality seems based on the preferences and behaviors of those invoking the standard. It fails to acknowledge diversity among women, among feminists of long standing, in terms of sexual practices and experiences. Frequently, feminists have found it explosive merely to articulate these differences, as when the New York Women Against Pornography organized a protest against an academic conference on women and sexuality at Barnard College and effectively halted the publication of a pre-conference diary of the planning for and philosophy of the event.

The general feminist anti-pornography critique must face a number of significant objections. Scientifically, it depends on a simplistic behavioral psychology to explain pornography's effects. It assumes that exposure to pornography has an undifferentiated, calculable effect on men, which has a direct result in both the man's consciousness and observable behavior. Behavioral psychology laboratory experiments, such as those of Edward Donnerstein, are brought forward in an opportunistic way to "prove" that the pornographic stimulus produces a bad response. People advancing this position seem to forget that a decade ago the women's movement unified in rejecting behavioral psychology in favor of a more humane and humanistic psychology and in attacking the close links of behavioral psychology to social engineering.

Behavioral psychology, after all, stands as the theoretical justification for behavior modification — i.e., psychic and physical assault, in prisons

and mental hospitals. In particular, behavior modification techniques such as shock therapy have had a long history of use against racial minorities, lesbians and gays, and problem adolescents. Behaviorist psychology rests on fundamental assumptions about personality, behavior, learning, and culture, about how things happen and how change takes place. It also has historical links to the forced ordering of individuals to the status quo. In these regards, it is absolutely antithetical to the principles of feminism. Such a model of human consciousness and behavior cannot be selectively taken over in a progressive way, however convenient an alliance might seem in the short run. It negates the social and individual complexities that shape human response.

Second, critiques of visual pornography too often rest on a naive and misleading understanding of the photographic/ electronic image. Too often the critique of sexual imagery assumes that such images simply and directly reproduce reality. Yet the major theoretical and practical development of image analysis in the past two decades has undermined the notion that an unmediated reality can be simply duplicated by image technology. Rather, realism itself is highly conventional, as are the ways that people understand images; i.e., such an understanding is highly socially constructed. Certainly images utilize imitation. But the nature of reproduction, media of reproduction, is such that reality — the tangible and social world as it exists — comes to us only via the media, which have a primary artificial and thus cultural nature. That's what's implied in the very word "image." We will find no simple "negative image" of women, nor any simple and universal "positive" one. Images are always understood in context and through the filter of the receiver's consciousness.

In this regard, it is revealing to consider that the feminist authority figures in NOT A LOVE STORY are all writers, well-established in verbal and print culture. Feminist anti-pornography writings lack spokespeople familiar with feminist work in the visual and performance arts. And despite the movement's fundamental insistence on "a clear and present difference" between erotica and pornography, it has never been able to put forth a substantial exhibition of art, film or video to support this claim.

Related to this problem of not grasping the nature of image material, the anti-porn stance often assumes that there is an immanent meaning in the object being studied. Implied is that pornographic images themselves contain specific and universal meanings. However, image research and theory has shown that "meaning" does not reside *in* the object. It is formed in a relation between the object and a subject-observer. Meaning is a constructed relation. It depends on the context as well as on the subject's precise history and consciousness. No unitary or singular meaning adheres to any image object but rather a range of possible constructed meanings, which come into actual being only through experimental acts. This is not to say that meaning is entirely relative and idiosyncratic, for the makers of images, the images

themselves, and the subjects who receive them always exist in history, in society, and their shared conventions are open to social and cultural analysis. But theorists of the mass media would argue against simplistic assumptions about meaning simply existing in the object as well as against simplistic assumptions about what meaning the subject receives or constructs. (For an extended discussion of these issues as developed in feminist film analysis, see the section on "Women and Representation" in JUMP CUT 29, particularly Chris Straayer's discussion of differential responses by lesbian-feminists to PERSONAL BEST.)

Most crucially, in the debates around pornography, distinctions are often made between a good and acceptable "erotica" and an evil and pernicious "pornography," yet such distinctions rest on the assumption that an image would have an inherent meaning. On closer inspection, this too is "interpretation," and it rests on a culturally and subjectively developed sense of good taste and aesthetic or moral education. Projections about distinctions between erotica and pornography are often put forth with no awareness at all of the ethnocentric, class, and race bias that they exhibit.

Another major problem occurs when critiques of pornography do not distinguish between the realm of fiction, fantasy, and imagination, on the one hand, and the fact of representation, on the other. In this, the feminist critique tends to echo the right wing in the opposition to porn — that showing sexuality is itself the problem. While anti-porn feminists may allow for some sexually explicit material, their analysis is often strongly normative. Politically correct sexuality can be shown, but certain behaviors and minority tastes are definitely beyond the acceptable. Robin Morgan has gone so far as to argue that not only can women change their basic fantasy structures by an act of will, but that they are obligated to do so to remain feminists: if fantasies are reactionary, change them. While it may well be that some women (and men) can and do change their basic sexual fantasies, it has yet to be shown how the vast majority of people can do so.

The deep power of much art, from fictional narration to visual representation, in print and in performance and on the screen, lies precisely in connecting with subconscious patterns of feeling and thinking. People initially form these patterns in infancy and childhood, and however much they later modify and transform their personality, most subconscious patterns are not completely transcended. Thus people commonly find pleasure in what they themselves may regard as politically incorrect fantasies. But this is part of the nature of fantasy and the artistic use of it. Fantasy is precisely what people desire but do not necessarily want to act on. It is an imaginative substitution and not necessarily a model for overt behavior. Morgan's famous slogan, "Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice," assumes a cause and effect relation which is speculative at best. Yes, some rapists use pornography (which alone doesn't prove cause), but not all men (and certainly not the majority) who use pornography become rapists. The

slogan implies a strategy: eliminate pornography and you will eliminate rape. Yet that strategy seems to substitute attacking the symptom for confronting the problem.

The evolution of the feminist anti-pornography movement has been to seek state censorship. Earlier protests used direct action, such as vandalizing objectionable billboards, informational leafleting, and picketing specific films. As women have turned to a strategy of pressuring for local censorship ordinances, they have been willing in some cases to form alliances with the right, such as the Moral Majority in Indianapolis. In doing so, the feminist anti-porn movement seems to have lost an understanding of how and why censorship has been used by the right, and also by the capitalist state. It seems increasingly to support a very narrow view of acceptable sexuality and acceptable representations of sexuality in imaginative forms. And it seems deeply confused about the actual history of sexual representation and censorship.

In the post-WW2 era, the struggle over censorship, especially in the areas of information on sexuality and of taboo-breaking art, came out of a long history of progressives attacking the conservative Puritan legacy of the U.S.'s colonial origins, and to attack censorship meant to struggle against the way the McCarthy era repressed dissent in all forms. Sexual conservatism moved not only against pornography but also against birth control information and against lesbian and gay sexuality. Censorship attacked literature that treated sexual themes, European films which showed nudity or criticisms of religion, the pivoting hips of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley, and nudity and profanity in the experimental films of the New American Cinema. In this context, those who fought censorship by invoking civil liberties and freedom of speech opened the very ground on which later movements could flourish.

The currently dominant version of the history of the women's movement stresses the autonomy of feminist organizing and its reaction to male chauvinism in the left, yet this obscures the actual origins of the first women to take up the feminist cause in the 60s. By and large they came to feminism with some experience in the left, the antiwar or student or civil rights movements, or from bohemian and artist culture or the counterculture, and they brought with them the considerable social disrepute of those origins. For example, the earliest feminist demonstrations included protesting the Miss America pageant by burning bras, a piece of guerrilla theater which both criticized conventional standards of beauty and indicated a physical and sensual freedom at the same time. "Bra-burning" was not an adequate symbol for the sexual change that most feminists sought, but in fact sexual change was an important part of the early feminist agenda, particularly as women discussed these issues in consciousness-raising groups. Sexual liberation played a part in the original feminist movement, although not in the same sense as male promoters of sexual freedom thought of it. Kate Millett's critique of the misogynist celebration of male sexuality in Lawrence, Mailer, and Miller was a justified response

to men who were not sensitive to what a feminist sexual politics was and could be. Yet Millett also included a chapter on Jean Genet as a writer who imaginatively explored power relations in sexuality, particularly homosexuality. Later developments in the women's movement seemed to drop these early tendencies,

As consciousness-raising groups declined as a central component of the movement, women stopped discussing details about their own sexuality especially when their sexual practice did not seem to match the assumed norm. The growth of a "respectable" reform movement within feminism as embodied in the National Organization of Women and *Ms.* magazine played down marginal and rebellious elements. And the growth of a straight-lesbian split in the early 70s further dampened the open discussion of sexuality among women across heterosexual-lesbian lines. The result was a kind of assumed (and reduced) norm of sexuality, which had the effect of hushing up women whose actual practice differed. This is the context in which the feminist anti-porn movement began to encounter vocal feminist opposition.

A feminist art magazine, *Heresies*, published a "Sex Issue" that contained a good amount of provocative, "politically incorrect" material. The Barnard Conference was held, with attendant controversy. It gave a forum to feminist thinkers who had misgivings about the notions of "politically correct" sexuality put forth by the feminist anti-porn movement. In a front-page *Village Voice* review of NOT A LOVE STORY, Ruby Rich turned a skeptical eye on the film's anti-porn movement spokeswomen and its quasi-religious-conversion style of argumentation. And two anthologies of feminist writings reconsidering the whole question of sexuality appeared: *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, and *Pleasure and Danger: Explorations in Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance. Most controversially, within the lesbian-feminist movement, some women came out and declared their involvement in sadomasochist sexuality and defended it as compatible with their feminist beliefs.

What this counter-development underlines is the uncertain future of feminist discussions of sexuality. What feminism has accomplished has been first of all an understanding of rape culture, of how power and sexual violence are used to control women. And it is also clear that old appeals to the "liberating" nature of sexual images or arguments against censorship that invoke civil liberties without addressing the fact of women's subjugation have no credibility among feminists. Any analysis of sexual representation must start from an understanding of male power and privilege. But it is also clear that feminism has not developed a generally accepted theory of sexuality. The division within the women's movement on this question indicates the need for further discussion, further analysis, and respectful opening up of the discussion to include everyone with a stake in the issues of sexuality and sexual representation.

In the face of an ongoing and often bitterly antagonistic division within

the women's movement on questions of pornography, sexual images and sexuality, we think a few basic principles are necessary on which to build a more fully developed analysis.

1. First of all, sexuality must be understood as a social construction. That is, sexuality is not a natural, simple, totally biological, and universal phenomenon. Indeed, when people talk about what is natural or normal, then they misrecognize that there is a social context of oppression and a real power differential between different social groups. And then people misrecognize or ignore the cultural dimensions of that practice they would speak of as natural; e.g., it's natural for women to have babies.

We need to understand sexuality as changing and changeable and fundamentally complex, for individuals and in society. It is profoundly social and historical in nature and formed within the interaction of body and mind, thoughts and feelings, unconscious and consciousness.

2. Second, sexuality must be understood with a full appreciation of the social diversity of and variations in sexual expression and behavior. Human social-sexual activity is extremely diverse across cultures and throughout history. This diversity must be accepted before we can begin to adequately discuss or theorize about sexuality. We need to know how sexuality is shaped within social relations and in turn shapes them. This means accepting diversity and variation as social facts. It means seeing sexual expression as a spectrum of different activities, not as a rigidly demarcated set of normal and abnormal behaviors.

3. Sexuality must be understood with a concept of contradiction, of how in its individual human development and in its general social appearance, sexuality is not a fixed and specific thing but a process with conflict and differentiation. We need (but don't presently have) an adequate theory of pleasure. How is desire, the seeking of pleasure, formed in human physical and mental development and shaped in ongoing expression and experience? The psychoanalytic theory of fantasy offers some clues but is very weak. We need to understand to what extent sexuality is shaped by infantile hostility, anger, frustration, and aggression when a child cannot have the warmth, touching, and food it craves. This earliest scenario of desire and pleasure and their deflection, and the extraordinarily long dependence of human children on adults, indicates that basic psychic patterns are established within power relations and these patterns continue into adult life.

4. Further discussion calls for a fuller understanding of the social and political nature of censorship in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere. The feminist critique of the liberal ideology of "sexual liberation" has advanced discussion to a different place, but in the process it has often dismissed lessons that can be learned from history. A substantial portion of 19th century feminism took up the cause of moral reform and became extremely conservative; there are signs that the same thing is happening today with feminist anti-pornography advocates. We must also consider the actual social and political impact of censorship struggles — who benefits from them and who suffers. The right and the

bourgeois status quo have a long history of using censorship against progressive forces and sexual minorities, particularly gay men and lesbians. To give local police, prosecutors, and community pressure groups a new power to censor and to assume they will only use it against blatantly violent and sexist pornography and not against feminist, left, and gay bookstores is to display a remarkable ignorance of history and a naiveté about how laws are actually used. The fundamentalist right has been particularly active in the Reagan era in rural and small town America in censoring of school and library books; new censorship laws give them more power. The state and its legal system are not neutral entities which feminists can simply use to their own ends. The shift in the anti-pornography movement from direct action, educational, and pressure tactics to seeking a legislative solution is a regressive move.

5. We have to understand the kind of knowledge that is gained in practice and experience about regarding sexuality and sexual representation. Much of the anti-pornography literature has been generated by people who seem ignorant of the actual work of women artists who dealt profoundly with issues of sexuality and with how to represent it in their work. Visual, performance, and media arts have many feminist artists who have thought a great deal about sexual representation, and in many cases challenge orthodoxy. These women's experience and ideas should form part of the ongoing discussion. Similarly, women who have worked in and are working in the sex industries have a kind and quality of information and analysis that needs to be incorporated into the discussion of sexuality and sexual representation. One fundamental premise of the early feminist movement was that all women had something to contribute to feminism. The respectable-reformist wing of the women's movement has moved away from that position and will only listen to prostitutes, models, and sex performers if the latter seem sufficiently repentant and enlightened. But the women who have the most experience with and the closest perception of the sexual-industrial system must be included in the discussion.

6. We need to find ways of carrying on a discussion of pornography and sexual images that allow for a wide range of and differences in sexual experience and practices. For example, many women have had varying exposure to pornography, and thus different kinds of familiarity with the issues. Much of the support for the feminist anti-porn position seems to come from women who do not have a very wide range of sexual experience or exposure to pornography and who are shocked by images in a slide show or pornographic clips in NOT A LOVE STORY. The organizing problem is both to validate these women's anger at abusive sexual images, and yet to understand that shock at what is unfamiliar may not be sufficient for developing an adequate understanding of sexuality and representations of it. It is common in the training of physicians and social workers to show them filmed examples of variant sexual activities so they are not shocked when patients and clients discuss their sexual practices. A similar kind of desensitizing is needed to carry on discussion of sexual representation. Sadly, the slide shows

and NOT A LOVE STORY often take worst-case examples to represent various sexual activities and deny the care and love that can be expressed through sexual minority practices.

7. We need to understand the actual use of sexual images in people's lives. Given the prevailing lack of information, analysts keep falling back on simplistic assumptions about pornography and other material. How and why do women use pornography, alone or in couple relations? Cable programmers report that most single women choose the "adult entertainment" (soft core porn) option in a cable package. Here is a market larger than the circulation of *Playboy* or *Hustler*. What does it mean that these women are choosing to have porn in their homes? Basically no one knows, but the mere fact of the phenomenon seems to challenge conventional notions about women's "natural" disinterest in porn,

8. We need to understand the situation in which we find ourselves in a dynamic way. Feminism has carried the discussion of sexuality and sexual representation further than it has gone before. The paradigm of discussion as it developed in the 50s and 60s is inadequate to a contemporary understanding of the issues. But we still need to understand human sexuality and how sexual representation functions more adequately before truly radical strategies can be proposed and acted on. In advanced capitalist societies, sexuality remains a site of contention, a locus of the intersecting demands of personal experience and merchandising and commodification, a place where private and public intersect. This explains the importance of sexual representation, but it doesn't automatically indicate how and why sexual representation functions and how it can be changed in a progressive direction. Answering those questions remains a task before us.

Male gay porn Coming to terms

by Richard Dyer

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The main suggestions I'd like to make in this article about gay male pornographic cinema are quite brief and simple. Broadly I'm going to argue that the narrative structure of gay porn^[1] is analogous to aspects of the social construction of both male sexuality in general and gay male sexual practice in particular. But before getting on to that, it seems necessary to say a few things by way of introduction. Pornography has recently become a Big Topic in left cultural work,^[2] and what I'm going to say needs to be situated in relation to this.

First, a definition — a working definition, the one I'm going to be working with here, rather than a statement of the correct definition of pornography. I want some definition that is as broadly descriptive as possible. Discussion about porn tends to start off by being either for or against all porn and to be caught up in equally dubious libertarian or puritanical ideas. I don't mean to imply that I believe in the myth of objectivity, that I start off utterly neutral. I'm a gay man, who has (unlike women) easy access to porn and can take pleasure in it,^[3] but who feels a commitment to the more feminist inflections of gay male politics. I'm also a socialist who sees porn as capitalist production but does not believe all capitalist cultural production always all the time expresses capitalist ideology.^[4] I'm constantly looking for moments of contradiction, instability and give in our culture, the points at which change can be effected, and want to start out with the possibility of finding it in porn as anywhere else. So the definition I'm going to use is that a pornographic film is *any* film that has as its aim sexual arousal in the spectator.

This definition makes porn film a familiar kind of genre, that is, one that is based on the effect that both producers and audiences know the film is supposed to have. It is not defined (or I am not asking to define it here), like the Western, gangster film or musical, by such aesthetic, textual elements as iconography, structure, style and so on, but by what it produces in the spectator. It is like genres such as the weepie and the

thriller, and also low or vulgar comedy. Like all of these, it is supposed to have an effect that is registered in the spectator's body — s/he weeps, gets goose bumps, rolls about laughing, comes. Like these genres, porn is usually discussed in relation to a similar, but "higher" genre which doesn't have a bodily effect. Thus, weepies (melodramas and soap opera) are compared to tragedy or realist drama, thrillers to mystery/detective stories (based on intellectual, puzzle-solving narratives), low comedy (farce) to high comedy (comedy of manners), and porn to erotica.

I'd like to use porn as a neutral term, describing a particular genre. If one defines porn differently, then the kind of defense of porn as a genre (but emphatically not of most porn that is actually available) that I'm involved with here is not really possible. Current feminist critiques of pornography[5] rightly stress the degradation of women that characterizes so much heterosexual porn, and these critiques in fact define pornography as woman-degrading representations of sexuality. Although feeling closer to some of those feminist articles that take issue with this hard line anti-porn position,[6] I do not feel as out of sympathy with, say, Andrea Dworkin's work as do many people, and especially gay men, that I know. Although in relation to gay porn, Dworkin is in some respects inaccurate (e.g. in stressing gay porn's use of socially inferior — young, black — men in "feminine" positions, whereas similarity between partners is more often the case) or out of date,[7] her rage at what so much of porn consists of is fully justified, and especially so because she effectively defines porn as that which is degrading and outrageous. But I'd like all the same to hang on to a wider notion of sexual representation, and still use the word *pornography* precisely because of its disreputable, carnal associations. (Maybe the feminist debate means that I can't use the word like this — but I don't want to fall for the trap of substituting the word *erotica*.[8])

The fact that porn, like weepies, thrillers and low comedy, is realized in/through the body has given it low status in our culture. Popularity these genres have, but arbiters of cultural status still tend to value "spiritual" over "bodily" qualities, and hence relegate porn and the rest to an inferior cultural position.

One of the results of this is that culturally validated knowledge of the body, of the body's involvement in emotion, tends to be intellectual knowledge about the body, uninformed by experimental knowledge of it.[9] Let me try to be clear about this. I'm not saying that there can be a transparent, pure knowledge of the body, untouched by historical and cultural reality. On the contrary, all knowledge is culturally and historically specific, we do not transcend our material circumstances. We learn to feel our bodies in particular ways, not "naturally." But an intellectual or spiritual knowledge about the body is different from experiential knowledge of the body. Both are socially constructed, but the latter is always in a dynamic material and physical relationship with the body, is always knowledge in and of the body. Intellectual or spiritual knowledge on the other hand divorces social construction from

that which it constructs, divorces knowledge about the body from knowing with the body. (Certain types of discourse analysis — but by no means all — clearly fall into the same idealist trap.[\[10\]](#))

Moreover, the effect of the cultural status of intellectual/spiritual accounts of the body is to relegate experiential knowledge of the body to a residual category. Of course idealist discourse accounts do not allow any such category at all.[\[11\]](#) Thus experiential knowledge (except when sanctified by the subjugation of the body in most forms of "physical education") is allowed to be both inferior and just a given, not socially constructed,[\[12\]](#) to be just "experience," not socially constructed experiential knowledge. By valuing the spiritual, the bodily is left as something natural, and sexuality as the most natural thing of all. What is in fact also socially constructed (experiential knowledge of the body, and of sexuality) is not recognized as such, and for that reason is not reflected upon, is allowed to go its supposed own way until it meets up with spiritual censors. Even gay and feminist theory have been notoriously reluctant to think through the social construction of the body without lapsing into the Scylla of Lacanian psycho-analysis (where social construction does not construct anything *out of* any material reality) and the Charybdis of both gay liberationist let-it-all-hang-out (where sexuality is a pure impulse awaiting release) and the implicit sexual essentialism of radical feminist ideas of masculine aggression and women's power.[\[13\]](#)

A defense of porn as a genre (which, I repeat, is not at all the same thing as defending most of what porn currently consists of) would be based on the idea that an art rooted in bodily effect can give us a knowledge of the body that other art cannot.

Even now porn does give us knowledge of the body — only it is mainly bad knowledge, reinforcing the worst aspects of the social construction of masculinity that men learn to experience in our bodies. All the same, porn can be a site for "re-educating desire," [\[14\]](#) and in a way that constructs desire in the body, not merely theoretically in relation to, and often against, it.

To do that though means rejecting any notion of "pure sex," and particularly the defense of porn as expressing or releasing a sexuality "repressed" by bourgeois (etc.) society. This argument has gained some ground in gay male circles, and with good reason. Homosexual desire has been constructed as perverse and unspeakable; gay porn does speak/show gay sex. Gay porn asserts homosexual desire, it turns the definition of homosexual desire on its head, says bad is good, sick is healthy and so on. It thus defends the universal human practice of same-sex physical contact (which our society constructs as homosexual). It has made life bearable for countless millions of gay men.

But to move from there to suggest that what we have here is a natural sexuality bursting out of the confines of heterosexual artificial repression is much more of a problem.

This is certainly the way that Gregg Blachford's article "Looking at Pornography"[\[15\]](#) can be read, and seems to be the contention behind David Ehrenstein's article "Within the Pleasure."[\[16\]](#) The latter argues that porn movies, unlike mainstream films that imply sexuality but don't show it, give us the pure pleasure of voyeurism which lies unacknowledged behind all cinema.

"The pornographic is obvious, absolute, unmistakable — no lies or omissions or evasions can hold quarter in its sphere."
(p. 65)

Porn is the "abandon of everything to the pleasure principle" (ibid), conceptualized as pure drive (the more usual appropriation of Freudian ideas than the Lacanian version so influential in academic film studies circles). Porn itself operates with this idea, and the view clearly expressed in the introduction to *Meat*,[\[17\]](#) a collection of writings from the magazine *Straight to Hell*. The magazine, like the book, consists entirely of personal accounts of gay sexual experience sent in to the magazine by gay men. I have no reason to suppose that the accounts are not genuine both in the sense of having actually been sent in (not ghost written) and describing real experiences. But this "genuineness" is not to be conflated, as book and magazine do, with the notion of an unconstructed sexuality — raw, pure and so on. A reading of *Meat*, or a look at gay porn, indicates really rather obviously that the sexuality described/ represented is socially meaningful. Class, ethnicity and of course concepts of masculinity and gayness/straightness all clearly mark these gay pornographic productions. Indeed the very stress on sexuality as a moment of truth, and its conceptualization as raw, pure etc., is itself historically and culturally produced.[\[18\]](#)

What makes *Meat* and gay movie house porn especially interesting and important is the extent to which they blur the line between representation and practice. *Meat* is based on (I think largely) true encounters that really happened. Watching porn in gay cinemas usually involves having sex as well — not just self-masturbation but sexual activity with others, in a scenario brilliantly evoked by Will Aitken in his article "Erect in the Dark."[\[19\]](#) In principle, then, gay porn is a form of representation that can be the site an occasion for the production of bodily knowledge of the body. In this definition, porn is too important to be ignored, or to be left to the pornographers.

NARRATIVE MANIFESTATION

I'd like now to turn to one of the ways in which the education of desire that porn is involved in is manifested, namely its use of narrative.[\[20\]](#)

It is often said that porn movies as a genre are characterized by their absence of narrative. The typical porn movie, hard core anyway, is held to be an endless series of people fucking, and not even, as Beatrice Faust notes, "fucking" in the normal physiological order that Masters and Johnson have "recorded."[\[21\]](#) Gay porn (and indeed what hetero porn I have seen), however, is full of narrative. Narrative is its very basis.

Even the simplest pornographic loops have narrative. In those quarter-in-the-slot machines where you just get a bit of a porn loop for your quarter, you are very conscious of what point (roughly) you have come into the loop, you are conscious of where the narrative has got to. Even if all that is involved is a fuck between two men, there are the following narrative elements: the arrival on the scene of the fuck, establishing contact (through greeting and recognition, or through a quickly established eye-contact agreement to fuck), undressing, exploring various parts of the body, coming, parting. The exploration of the body often involves exploring those areas less heavily codified in terms of sexuality, before "really getting down to/on with" those that are (genitals and anus). Few short porn films don't involve most or all of these narrative elements, and in that order.

Usually too there is some sort of narrative detail — in *MUSCLE BEACH*, one man (Rick Wolfmier) arrives on the scene (a beach) in a truck, the other man (Mike Betts) is already there sunbathing. Wolfmier walks by the sea for while. There is quite a long sequence of shot/ reverse shot cutting as they see each other and establish contact. Self-masturbation precedes their actual physical contact with each other. After orgasm, Rickmier drives away again in his truck. Already then minimal character elements are present, of not inconsiderable social interest — the iconography of the truck, the looks of the two men, the culture of the beach and of bodybuilding, and so on.

Even when the film is yet more minimal than this, there is still narrative — and essentially the same narrative, too. Some gay porn loops simply show one man masturbating. A rather stylish version of this is *ROGER*, which just has the eponymous star masturbating. The music is a kind of echoing drumbeat. There is no set to speak of. The lighting is red, covering the screen in varieties of pulsating hue. The film cuts between long shots and medium shots in a quite rhythmic way, often dissolving rather than cutting clean. It will be clear that there is something almost abstract or avant-garde-ish about the film, as the cinematic means play visually with its solo subject, Roger masturbating. Yet even here there is a basic narrative — Roger enters, masturbates, comes. (Where you put your quarter in might mean that *you* start with his orgasm and run on where he comes in. But you'd know and be able to reconstruct the proper narrative order that your quarter has cut across.)

Even in so minimal and abstract a case, there is narrative — *ROGER* is a classic goal-directed narrative.^[22] The desire that drives the porn narrative forward is the desire to come, to have an orgasm. And it seems to me that male sexuality, homo or hetero, is socially constructed, at the level of representation anyway, in terms of narrative; that, as it were, male sexuality is itself understood narratively.

The goal of the pornographic narrative is coming; in filmic terms, the goal is ejaculation, that is, visible coming. If the goal of the pornographic protagonist (the actor or "character") is to come, the goal of the spectator is to see him come (and, more often than not, probably, to

come at the same time as him). Partly this has to do with "proof," with the form's "literalness," as Beatrice Faust puts it, with the idea that if you don't really see semen, the performer could have faked it (and so you haven't had value for money). But partly too it has to do with the importance of the visual in the way male sexuality is constructed/ conceptualized. It is striking how much pornographic literature, not a visual medium, stresses the visible elements of sex. (Most remarkable perhaps is Walter, the Victorian narrator of *My Secret Life*, with his obsessive desire to see into his partner's vagina, even to the detail of seeing, for instance, what his semen looks like after he has ejaculated it into her vagina.) Men's descriptions of their own erections seldom have to do with how their penises feel, but with how they look. The emphasis on seeing orgasm is then part of the way porn (re)produces the construction of male sexuality.

Could it be otherwise, could sexuality be represented differently? So dominant are masculine-centered definitions of sexuality that it often seems as if all representations of sexuality (pornographic or otherwise) are constructed as driven narrative. But there are alternatives, and one that struck me was the lesbian sequences at the end of *JE TU IL ELLE*, directed by Chantal Akerman. (As Margaret Mead pointed out in her work on sex roles in anthropology, you only need one example of things being different to establish that things can be different in the organization of human existence and hence that things can be changed.) The sequence itself is part of a (minimalist) narrative; but taken by itself it does not have the narrative drive of male porn. It starts in *media res*. There is no arrival in the room, the women are already making love when the sequence starts (though the previous shot has, perhaps ambiguously, established that they are going to make love). There is no sense of a progression to the goal of orgasm. Nor is there any attempt to find visual or even (as in hetero porn?) aural equivalents for the visible male ejaculation. In particular, there is no sense of genital activity being the last, and getting-down-to-the-real-thing, stage of the experience. It is done in three long takes. There are no editing cuts across a sexual narrative (as in gay porn — see below). The harsh white lighting and the women's white bodies on crumpled white sheets in a room painted white, contribute to the effect of representing the sexuality as more dissolving and ebbing than a masculine thrusting narrative. Let me stress that I am *not* talking about what the women are doing. For much of the time their actions are far more snatching and grabbing than, for instance, the generally smooth, wet action of fellatio in gay porn. My point is the difference in narrative organization, the cinematic representation of sexuality. [\[23\]](#)

I am not suggesting that this is a better representation of sexuality, or the correct mode for representing lesbian sexuality. Also I want to bracket the question of whether the difference between the two modes of representation is based on biological differences between female and male sexuality, or on different social constructions sexuality, or on a combination of the two.[\[24\]](#) All I want to get over is the difference itself, and the fact that male porn, whether homo or hetero, is ineluctably

caught in the narrative model. (This is particularly significant in hetero porn in that it is predominantly constructed around a female protagonist, who is attributed with this narrativized sexuality. However, I am not about to get into whether this is a gain — a recognition of female sexuality as desire — or a loss — a construction of female sexuality in male terms.)[\[25\]](#)

The basis of gay porn film is a narrative sexuality, a construction of male sexuality as the desire to achieve the goal of a visual climax. In relation to gay sexual politics, it is worth signaling that this should give pause to those of us who thought/hoped that being a gay man meant that we were breaking with the gender role system. At certain levels this is true, but there seems no evidence that in the predominant form of how we represent our sexuality to ourselves (in gay porn) we in any way break from the norms of male sexuality.

Particularly significant here is the fact that although the pleasure of anal sex (that is, of being anally fucked) is represented, the narrative is never organized around the desire to be fucked, but around the desire to ejaculate (whether or not following on from anal intercourse). Thus although at the level of public representation gay men may be thought of as deviant and disruptive of masculine norms because we assert the pleasures of being fucked and the eroticism of the anus,[\[26\]](#) in our pornography this takes a back seat.

This is why porn is politically important. Gay porn, like much of the gay male ghetto, has developed partly out of the opening up of social spaces achieved by the gay liberation movements. But porn and the ghetto have overwhelmingly developed within the terms of masculinity. The knowledge that gay porn (re)produces must be put together with the fact that gay men (like straight men but unlike women) do have this mode of public sexual expression available to them, however debased it may be. Like male homosexuality itself, gay porn is always in this very ambiguous relationship to male power and privilege, neither fully within it nor fully outside it.[\[27\]](#) But that ambiguity is a contradiction that can be exploited. In so far as porn is part of the experimental education of the body, it has contributed to and legitimized the masculine model of gay sexuality, a model that always implies the subordination of women. But rather than just allowing it to carry on doing so, it should be our concern to work against *this* pornography by working with/ within pornography to change it — either by interventions within pornographic filmmaking itself.[\[28\]](#) We might do this by the development of porn within the counter cinemas (always remembering that the distinction between porn in the usual commercial sense and sexual underground/ alternative/ independent cinema has always been blurry when you come to look at the films themselves). Or we may develop a criticism that involves audiences reflecting on their experience of pornography (rather than by closing down on reflection by straight condemnation or celebration of it).

So far all I've been talking about is the most basic, minimal narrative

organization of (gay) male pornography. However, gay porn is characterized as much by the elaborations of its narrative method as by its insistence on narrative itself. Though the bare narrative elements may not often go beyond those described above, they are frequently organized into really quite complex narrative wholes. Often there is a central narrative thread — two men who are in love or who want to get off with each other. But this is punctuated by almost all of the devices of narrative elaboration imaginable, most notably flashbacks (to other encounters, or previous encounters of the main characters with each other), fantasies (again, with others or each other, of what might or could be), parallelism (cutting back and forth between two or more different sexual encounters) and so on. All preserve the coming-to-visual-climax underlying narrative organization, but why this fascination with highly wrought narrative patterns? To begin with, of course, it is a way of getting more fucks in, with more people.^[29] There is even perhaps an element of humor, as the filmmakers knowingly strain their imagination to think of ways of bringing in yet more sex acts. But it is also a way of teasing the audience sexually, because it is a way of delaying climax, of extending foreplay. In parallel sequences, each fuck is effectively temporally extended, each climax delayed. More generally, the various additional encounters delay the fulfillment of the basic narrative of the two men who are the central characters.

(For example, in *L.A. TOOL AND DIE* the underlying narrative is Wylie's journey to Los Angeles to find a job and his lover Hank. Wylie and Hank are played by the stars of the film, Will Seagers and Richard Locke, so we know that their having sex together must be the climax. But there are various encounters along Wylie's way, including memories, observation of other couples, incidental encounters with other men, and even inserted scenes with characters with whom Wylie has no connection, before arrival at Los Angeles and finally making it with Hank.)

There is a third reason for this narrative elaboration. Just as the minimal coming-to-visual-climax structure is a structural analogue for male sexuality, so the effective multiplication of sex acts through elaborate narrativity is an analogue for a (utopian) model of a gay sexual lifestyle that combines a basic romanticism with an easy acceptance of promiscuity. Thus the underlying narrative is often romantic, the ultimate goal is to make love with the man; but along the way a free-ranging, easygoing promiscuity is possible. While not all gay men actually operate with such a model of how they wish to organize their affective lives, it is a very predominant one in gay cultural production, a utopian reconciliation of the desire for romance *and* promiscuity, security *and* freedom, making love *and* having sex.

It is worth stressing how strong the element of romance is, since this is perhaps less expected than the celebration of promiscuity. The plot of *L.A. TOOL AND DIE* outlined above is a good example, as in *NAVY BLUE* in which two sailors on shore leave seek out other lovers because each doesn't think that the other is gay, yet each is really in love with the

other (as fantasy sequences make clear). Only at the end of the film do they realize their love for each other. Or take *WANTED*, a gay porn version of *THE DEFIANT ONES*, in which two convicts, one gay (Al Parker) and one straight (Will Seagers), escape from prison together. Despite Seagers' hostility to Parker's sexuality, they stick together, with Parker having various sexual encounters, including watching Seagers masturbate. The film is a progression from the sadistic prison sexuality at the start (also offered, I know, as pornographic pleasure), through friendly mutual sexual pleasuring between Parker and various other men, to a final encounter, by an idyllic brookside, between Parker and Seagers which is the culmination of their developing friendship. Some men I know who've seen the film find this final sequence too conventionally romantic (which it is — that's why I like it) or else too bound up with the self-oppressive fantasy of the straight man who deigns to have sex with another man. It can certainly be taken that way, but I know when I first saw it I was really moved by what seemed to be Seagers' realization of the sexuality of his feeling for Parker. And what particularly moved me was the moment when Seagers comes in Parker's mouth, and the latter gently licks the semen off Seagers' penis. Here it seemed was an explicit and arousing moment of genital sexuality that itself expressed a tender emotional feeling — through its place in the narrative, through the romanticism of the setting, through the delicacy of Parker's performance. If porn taught us *that* more often ...

One of the most interesting ways of making narratives complex in gay porn is the use of films within films. Many gay porn films are about making gay porn films. Many others involve someone showing gay porn films to himself or someone else (with the film-within-the-film then becoming for a while the film we are watching). The process of watching, and also of being watched (in the case of those films about making gay porn) are thus emphasized. This is done not in the interests of foregrounding the means of construction in order to deconstruct them, but because the pleasure of seeing sex is what motivates (gay) male pornography and can be heightened by having attention drawn to it. (There is a whole other topic, to do with the power in play in looking/being looked at, which I won't get into here.) We have in these cases a most complex set of relations between screen and auditorium. On screen someone actually having sex is watched (photographed) by a filmmaker watched (photographed) by another invisible filmmaker (the one who made the film on screen), and all are watched by someone in the audience who is (or generally reckons to be) himself actually having sex. Gay porn here collapses the distinctions between representation and that which it is a representation of, while at the same time showing very clearly the degree to which representation is part of the pleasure to be had in that which it is a representation of. Porn (all porn) is, for good or ill (and currently mainly for ill), part of how we live our sexuality. How we represent sexuality to ourselves is part of how we will live it, and porn has rather cornered the market on the representation of sexuality. Gay porn seems to make that all clearer, because there is greater equality between the participants (performers, filmmakers, audiences) [\[30\]](#) — which permits a fuller exploration of the education of

desire that is going on. Porn involves us bodily in that education. Criticism of porn should be opening up reflection on the education we are receiving in order to change it.

Notes

[1.](#) I'd like to thank JUMP CUT editorial collective for their helpful and also very enjoyable involvement in the editing of this article. Since first writing it, I have incorporated not only many of their suggestions but also much of the useful discussions on pornography and gay macho in the Birmingham Gay Men's Socialist Group. Many thanks to all these people then — but I'll still take the blame for the finished article.

For the rest of the article, gay porn will always refer to gay male porn.

[2.](#) For a general introduction to this, see Julia Lesage, "Women and Pornography," JUMP CUT, No. 26, pp. 46-47, 60, and the bibliography by Gina Marchetti in the same issue, pp. 56-60.

[3.](#) This access is not actually so easy outside of certain major metropolitan centers, and the recent anti-pornography legislation in Great Britain has hit gay porn far more decisively than straight.

[4.](#) This argument is developed by Terry Lovell in *Pictures of Reality*, London: British Film Institute, 1981.

[5.](#) For example, Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Putnam's, 1981); Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence* (London: The Women's Press, 1981); Laura Lederer (ed), *Take Back the Night* (New York: William Morrow, 1980).

[6.](#) For example, Kathy Myers, "Towards a Feminist Erotica," *Camerawork*, March 1982, pp. 14-16, 19, reviews of Dworkin and Griffin by Deborah Allen and Gavin Harris in *Gay Information* No. 9/10, pp. 20-27, and by Janice Winship in *Feminist Review* No. 11, pp. 97-100, and B. Ruby Rich's review of NOT A LOVE STORY in *Village Voice*, July 20, 1982.

[7.](#) See Allen and Harris above, p. 22.

[8.](#) "Because it is less specific, less suggestive of actual sexual activity, 'erotica' is regularly used as a euphemism for 'classy porn.' Pornography expressed in literary language or expensive photography and consumed by the upper middle class is 'erotica; the cheap stuff, which can't pretend to any purpose but getting people off, is smut." Ellen Willis, quoted by Mick Carter in "The Re-education of Desire: Some Thoughts on Current Erotic Visual Practices," *Art and Text* No. 4, pp. 20-38.

[9.](#) An example of this is the role of the representation of the body in Christian iconography. At one level, the body of Christ could not be a more central motif of Christianity, most notably in the image of Christ on the cross. But the tendency remains to stress what the body means at the expense of what it is, to highlight transcendence over the body. In

the Christian story of Christ as the Word made flesh, it is the Word that ultimately matters, not the flesh.

[10.](#) The magazine *m/f* is the leading example of this.

[11.](#) For a critique of idealism, see Terry Lovell, cited above.

[12.](#) The one area of cultural work that has been concerned with body knowledge is dance, but the leading exponents of Modern Dance such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis have been influentially committed to notions of natural movement. See Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979.

[13.](#) See Elizabeth Wilson, *What Is To Be Done About Violence Against Women?* Penguin, 1983.

[14.](#) See Mick Carter, cited above.

[15.](#) In *Gay Left* No. 6, pp. 16-20.

[16.](#) In *Wide Angle* Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 62-65. I am conscious that because this article, in a manner of speaking, attacks things I have written — and even attacks what it infers from them about my sexual practices — that I may here treat the article rather unfairly.

[17.](#) San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1981.

[18.](#) See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

[19.](#) In *Gay News*, Winter Extra, December 1981/January 1982, pp. 15-20.

[20.](#) This is only one element of any full analysis. One of the major elements not discussed here, and that needs work doing on it, is the role of iconography — of dress and setting, and especially performers, the male types that are used, porn stars' images and so on, all drenched in ideological meanings.

[21.](#) *Women, Sex and Pornography*, Penguin, 1982, p. 16.

[22.](#) See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

[23.](#) For further discussion, see Angela Martin, "Chantal Akerman's films: A Dossier," *Feminist Review*, No. 3 pp. 24-47.

[24.](#) For a discussion of this difficult nature/nurture debate from a socialist feminist perspective that does not discount the contribution of biology altogether, see Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics*, London: Tavistock, 1982.

[25.](#) See Dennis Giles, "Angel on Fire," *Velvet Light Trap*, No. 16.

[26.](#) See Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, London: Allison and Busby, 1978.

[27.](#) See Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, London: Verso, 1980, Chapter two, for a discussion of the relationship between male homosexuality and women's subordination.

[28.](#) For some consideration of this, see Paul Alcuin Siebenand, "The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles: The Industry and the Audience," doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, (Department of Communications), 1975.

[29.](#) Cf. Same Mele and Mark Thirkell, "Pornographic Narrative," *Gay Information* No. 6.

[30.](#) This is a question of degree — producers and audiences are not equal in their power of determining the form that representation takes, and especially in a field so fiercely colonized by capitalist exploitation as pornography. At the psychological level, performers and audience members are not necessarily equal, in that performers are validated as attractive sexual beings to a degree that audience members may not be. But the point is that they are all gay men participating in a gay subculture, a situation that does not hold with heterosexual porn. See Siebenand, cited above, and also Tom Waugh in the article in this issue of JUMP CUT.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Men's pornography gay vs. straight

by Tom Waugh

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INTRODUCTION: LABELS AND RED HERRINGS

Taking part in a debate about pornography, I am painfully aware of contradictions involved in my position as a person to whom a great many compromising labels may be applied (in alphabetical order: academic, anti-patriarchal Canadian, cinephile, contributor-to-a-magazine-on-trial-for-obscenity, cyclist, gay, male, socialist, teacher, thirty-five, unattached, vanilla-sexual, wasp, etc.).

I belong to a cultural and political context — the urban gay male community/ies — in which dirty pictures have a hard-won centrality, both historically and at present. I am also an individual consumer: I couldn't begin to describe the importance in my own political/personal growth of the erotic components in the work of Baldwin, Gênet, Pasolini, Warhol/Morrissey, Burroughs, Michelangelo, and even Gore Vidal (to begin as usual with the most respectable list), not to mention *Tomorrow's Man* (the crypto-gay physique magazine I discovered on the sports rack of the local newsstand as a trembling teenager in Presbyterian Ontario in the mid-sixties), and *Straight to Hell* (the underground folk-raunch magazine of readers narratives I discovered as a trembling grad student in New York City in the early seventies, when I was wondering whether marching in Gay Pride could blow my comprehensives).

How then am I to express my solidarity in words and actions with women's rightful denunciation of pornography as an instrument of antifeminist backlash, of the usurpation by industrial capitalism of the private sexual sphere, of the merchandizing and degradation of women's bodies, of the incitement of rape and violence against women? Can I do so without aping the standard liberal male guilt-trip or its "we're oppressed and alienated too" refrain? without echoing the occasional anti-feminist tirades in the gay press by beleaguered men who think they see women lining up alongside the cops? Can I do so while insisting

that sexual liberation is still an essential component of political liberation and that erotica has a rightful, even indispensable, place in the culture and politics of sexual liberation — gay, lesbian, feminist, and yes, straight-male?

Is it enough for me to repeat that anti-woman pornography, a symptom, can only be eradicated by a fundamental transformation of society along feminist-socialist lines? And that, in the meantime, if I had time, I could support various proposed liberal stopgap measures by the bourgeois state towards curbing pornography's worst social effects. These would include, that is, *measures short of obscenity provisions in criminal codes* such as: the use of labor and criminal codes to halt child exploitation, forced labor, non-consensual sexual relations, and the incitement of violence. I'd support the regulation of an above-ground sex industry by means of unionization, taxation, labor codes, public visibility restrictions. In short, I'd support the kind of state intervention that regulates tobacco and alcohol (even though this kind of regulation has led in France to a kind of de facto suppression of gay culture). I also obviously support non-state strategies of consumer resistance like boycotts and education, such as those led around "non-pornographic" films as *CRUISING*, *WINDOWS*, and *DRESSED TO KILL* in which I have participated.

Censorship is both a red herring and a real issue, and often a means of halting debate (one Montreal writer demands that readers take a stand either for or against porn before establishing terms or definitions; a Toronto writer demands that readers choose between life and art). For me, a gay man struggling against continuing, in fact escalated, censorship of gay newspapers and films, and, in the Canadian context, resisting the most ferocious police suppression of our culture in any Western society, censorship is a real issue. Even though many of the most visible anti-porn activists have repeatedly renounced legal sanctions against pornography and some have stressed the necessity of gay-lesbian rights education as part of the anti-porn discourse, many mainstream spokespeople are not so careful. As just one example, in 1978, the year that *The Body Politic*, the Canadian national gay-lesbian paper, began its still ongoing struggle to survive in the obscenity courts, Canadian feminist spokespeople testified before a parliamentary committee and saw their proposals for revision of obscenity statutes (to provide for violence) manipulated and appropriated by homophobic liberals and the New Right alike. The coincidence may or may not be only symbolic, but we don't have time to wonder.

In 1980, the National Organization of Women in the U.S. resolved that pornography is not a genuine lesbian-gay rights issue, nor are pedophilia, sadomasochism, and public sexuality (all of which overlap with the issue of pornography). All four of these issues have been central concerns within the gay male community/ies since Stonewall, and favorite pretexts for our persecution. But some feminists, straight and lesbian alike, have tended to regard them as areas where we are struggling merely to exercise our full patriarchal privileges as men (a

view that has sometimes been partly justified). Within the last few years, the lesbian-feminist community has learned not only that it will not be able to resolve these issues away but also that they are of utmost pertinence to feminism and lesbian liberation, and furthermore, that (who ever would have thought?) the interests of gay men and feminists on these issues are not necessarily irreconcilable. The so-called choice between censorship and pornography, art and life, is falsely formulated. Women's right to defend themselves against patriarchal violence and the right of women and sexual minorities to full cultural, sexual, and political expression, are allied rights, both threatened in the current conjuncture. To prioritize or rank them on our agenda greatly damages the anti-patriarchal movement (just as reproductive rights must not have less priority on the agenda than lesbian rights or vice versa).

The recent debate on sexuality within the feminist community, in the headlines of the alternative media since the *Heresies* sex issue, has already had some input from the gay men's movement. In all modesty, anti-patriarchal gay men still have an important contribution to make. It may be no accident that some of the first utterances of the new feminist sexual outlaws appeared in gay newspapers (with varying degrees of lesbian input, from a little (*The Advocate*), to some (*The Body Politic*), to tons (*Gay Community News*). Gay men were struck from the beginning by how much the new discourse of women's pleasure echoed but went further than the discourse of early gay liberation (in the era when gay groups used to call themselves the Gay Liberation Front instead of the National Task Force), profiting directly from two decades of feminist debate. Of course the anti-porn right saw our satisfaction as patronizing and the use of our media as conspiratorial:

"The lesbian S & M [sic] movement is a growing and organized one, especially in San Francisco. One of the leaders, Pat Califia, who has a slave, wrote the article, 'The New Puritans,' which was published in the paper *The Advocate*. One of her arguments is that she doesn't want anyone taking her fist fucking magazines away from her. I think it is very interesting to note that most articles on this appear in primarily gay male publications. It seems to make a lot of sense since gay men tend to like porn, have a stake in it, and reinforce these attitudes to their advantage. This is again our colonization, women being taken over by gay men instead of straight men."[\[1\]](#)

Regardless of the obvious rejoinder that we are too busy molesting children to have time to be taking over women, I would like to explore in this article our stake in porn, to sketch some of the contours of our contribution to the debate on sexuality and porn. Specifically, I would like to situate gay male pornography in relation to straight male pornography in terms of its uniquely contradictory mixture of progressive and reactionary characteristics in its relations of production, exhibition, consumption, and representation. Far from wishing to offer an apologetics for gay porn against homophobic dismissals from within

the women's movements, both from the NOW center and the WAP right (I realize that my refutation of such dismissals are open to being misread as defensiveness, an unnecessary attitude I may not be wholly successful in avoiding), I feel that an objective analysis of gay pornography will clarify and expand many of the terms of the current debate.

The following "topographical" chart is largely contemporary in its focus, that is, post-sixties, though reference is made to the historical evolution of gay pornography particularly since the establishment of embryonic modern-day gay ghettos following World War II (I also refer here and there to classical stag movies). My main object is a relatively loose comparison of gay male pornography to straight male pornography, referring wherever relevant to its major product divisions: theatrical films, hardcore and softcore; rental or mail-order video; arcade/adult-bookstore materials, mostly film loops and hardcore magazines; mail-order films and photographic sets (beefcake); glossy mass-distribution *Playboy*-imitation magazines like *Blueboy*; and finally, porn that may be called "artisanal," amateur or folk, both written and visual, e.g. *Straight to Hell*. (Obviously these categories sometimes overlap, as with video versions of theatrical films, and some exclusions are arbitrary — live performances, written materials except for the artisanal STH, and ancillary branches of the industry like gadgets).

The comparison is organized in terms of relations of production (making), exhibition (showing), consumption (looking), and representation (depicting). Obviously, this chart, with its illustrations and appendages, is a work-in-progress, and I welcome any corrections or additions. It may reflect also a certain unavoidable bias and a greater expertise in the gay male column which readers are asked to tolerate. On the sidelines, I also offer a brief reflection trying to connect the feminist conception of patriarchal public space to the gay ghetto and its pornographic cultural forms. And lastly, since we have often heard the question as to what a nonsexist pornography of the utopian future might look like, I conclude with an examination of Curt McDowell's *LOADS*, a non-commercial gay pornographic film from San Francisco (recently seized in Montreal incidentally) with the idea of wondering in concrete terms how far or how near we might be to that ideal.

A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

Much of the debate has been a war of definitions, of distinctions between sexist pornography and nonsexist erotica, between my art and your smut, and so on. All such definitions tend to be, for reasons of semantics, ideological rather than scientific. This is true whether explicitly so (as in any definition based on values, inherent artistic merit, or political or educational effectivity), or by implication, that is, expressed as formal/aesthetic, legalistic, physiological (Auden defined pornographic as anything that gave him an erection), historical, sociological or commercial (the definitions of pornographers themselves). I am not the first to insist that any advance in the debate

must acknowledge all of the definitions currently in play since these definitions themselves are weapons in the ongoing struggle.

I will not add to the confusion by proposing a new definition (except insofar as the above caveat and a refusal to distinguish between erotica and pornography constitute a definition), since for gay people the definition imposed by police, censors and courts at any given point will always be the determining one.

However, since discussion of pornography is becoming increasingly acrimonious and difficult, and since misunderstandings are already being translated into social and legal practice, I will make a few prescriptions. Participants in the debate must situate themselves in relation to the definitions struggle and must specify exactly what images or texts they are referring to and exactly what social remedies they are proposing, if any.

This precision is indispensable in avoiding co-optation by the book-banners, the homophobes and the Moral Majority, who have gotten so far by blurred distinctions and misleading generalizations. Next, every exclusively single-issue intervention is a step backwards. Connections must be established at every point between the porn debate and the other issues of the anti-patriarchal struggle, especially reproductive rights, sex education, and lesbian/gay rights. I would go even further to say that every comprehensive intervention on pornography must acknowledge the existence of gay male pornography. To pass over the stacks of *Blueboy* lined up beside *Penthouse* is either homophobic (as in the case of the National Film Board of Canada's NOT A LOVE STORY) or misguided liberalism, misguided even if the evasion arises out of solidarity with gay people. General propositions about pornography that do not apply to gay pornography are inadmissible (for example, does, "All pornography degrades women"[\[2\]](#), apply to gay male pornography? if so, how? if not, why not?). Progressive gay men have nothing to fear from an open and non-homophobic confrontation with gay pornography, nor from our own self-critical confrontation with the abuses of pornography within our community.

Finally, the following distinctions are essential to any meaningful discussion: between pornography and violent pornography, between consent and coercion, between consensual power play (SM) and violence, between images and actions, between individual sexual practices and collective sexual politics. This latter distinction is crucial. The personal may be political, but there is no such thing as a politically correct individual sexuality. By this I mean that we must support the full rights of sexual outlaws to act out their individual (consensual) desires, whether sadomasochists or drag queens or Phyllis Schlafly. Andrea Dworkin's statement that all fucking is inherently sadistic discredits her other work, some of which is useful. Specific sexual practices as depicted in a given image do not necessarily coincide with relations of exploitation or domination, nor with any other power relation. A man or woman portrayed as getting fucked cannot automatically be seen as

victim. Gay porn in particular, and of course gay sexuality in general, undermine the widespread assumption in the porn debate that penetration in itself is an act of political oppression. A sexual act or representation acquires ideological tenor only through its personal, social, narrative, iconographic, or larger political context.

THE GHETTO: A NOTE ON SPACE

One way of looking at the evolution of the gay movement since World War II is as the growth of our claims to space. Our first claim was to the inviolability of our private space. (The state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation, said Trudeau, when he decriminalized consensual sodomy between two adults in 1969 — a reform only a minority of U.S. states have followed.) Our next claim was for the inviolability of the ghetto, our gathering places and neighborhoods. Our final claim was full open access to all public space of our society, and in fact, many of us insisted, to alter the terms of that society. Our claim to our media and to our culture, including our pornography, is part of all three of these claims to space.

When we talk this over with our feminist allies, we often fail to strike a sympathetic chord. The space that we have been demanding is only the space we have been conditioned to expect as men in patriarchal society, space that has been only partly withheld because we suck cock. Women have not yet achieved access to that space, either literally in terms of public territory, or metaphorically in terms of media of cultural, sexual, and political expression. In short, gay pornography profits from and aspires to the institutionalized presence of patriarchal power built on the absence/silence of women, and is thus complicit in the oppression of women.

This is true and it hurts. But it's not all of the truth. Firstly our claims to space, private, ghetto or public, have not been achieved except incompletely and provisionally, always subject to invasion and revocation. Ghettoized spaces, as women have always sensed in their kitchens and church basements and offices, are no substitute for autonomous political space; they are more like enclaves of self-defense and accommodation. Our pornography, in fact, reflects the recognition of this insufficiency. Of the 110 STH anecdotes I mention elsewhere, only eight take place in ghetto space (saunas, discos, backrooms, cinemas), whereas about forty take place in our private homes and the rest all take place in non-ghetto public space. Our greatest visibility may be in the ghetto, but our fantasies and our everyday lives are elsewhere.

Pornography has become one of our privileged cultural forms, the expression of that quality for which we are stigmatized, queer-bashed, fired, evicted, jailed, hospitalized, electroshocked, disinherited, raped in prison, refused at the U.S. border, silenced, and ghettoized—that quality being our sexuality. Our pornography is shaped both by the oppression told by my long chain of participles and by our conditioning as men in patriarchy. We must direct our claim to our pornographic culture, not towards occupying our share of patriarchal space, but towards

shattering that space, transforming it.

ON GETTING FUCKED

Richard Dyer's assertion in the accompanying article about the dominance of heterosexist modes of sexuality in gay porn narrative needs some qualification:

"... there seems no evidence that in the predominant form of how we represent our sexuality to ourselves (in gay porn) we in any way break from the norms of male sexuality ... the narrative is never organized around the desire to be fucked, but around the desire to ejaculate (whether or not following on from anal intercourse). Thus although at the level of public representation, gay men may be thought of as deviant and disruptive of masculine norms because we assert the pleasures of being fucked and the eroticism of the anus, in our pornography this takes a back seat."

This may be true of many or even most theatrical films (though I think this requires further research — certainly lots of individual sequences I remember contradict this). However, passive penetration fantasies are extremely common as narrative principles in many non-commercial films and anecdotes I have encountered (as are fellatio fantasies, active or passive, which do not seem to be organized around the narrator's ejaculation). Perhaps the non-commercial or artisanal origin of the examples that come to mind says more about the porn industry than our erotic culture as an audience, but that remains to be seen. What does a passive penetration fantasy or a submissive fantasy look or sound like? This question is not only of academic interest. The active penetration fantasy is such a dominant one in the straight male porn industry and in patriarchal culture in general, that, in looking for alternatives, we should analyze the other side of the coin. I've talked about this with some women who, like many gay men and perhaps straight men, are aware of and often disturbed by fantasies of passive penetration, of submission, even of rape.

I propose this advertisement for a San Francisco gay bar, and this abridged citation from a STH anecdote from Meat, both as a footnote to Dyer's generalization, and as evidence for an investigation it may be profitable to pursue:

"Air Force Guy Takes 37 Cocks Up Asshole in One Session"

"A.P.O. San Francisco — I heard about this construction site with a lot of horny studs. I'm 24, 6'1" tall, 165 lbs, white and love to get fucked ... gang fucked. Wore cutoffs and hung around the front gate at closing time. A dude eyed me the once over and invited me in. He was in his late 20s and was pretty rugged looking. Led me to a trailer and ripped my Levis off. My head was immediately kissing a desk top and my bare ass protruding over the desk. Talk about getting

fucked rough! Heard the door open and more dudes walked in grabbing for their zippers ... To get guys up for it quicker I started a line in front as well as in back and sucked off dudes. Got cream in my mouth and in my ass. My asshole was raw but well-fucked, and I'd like to go back for more." (From *Meat*)

MEN'S PORNOGRAPHY, GAY VS. STRAIGHT: A TOPOGRAPHICAL COMPARISON

Relations of Production

Gay Male Pornography

1. gay male producer employs gay male models
2. small-scale industrial or artisanal production and distribution base for all commercial categories, reputedly some mafia presence in theatrical films
3. producer control, non-union employees paid low flat rate, even for stars; stigma usually prevents career crossover for performers
4. theatrical industry stagnant since mid-seventies with only a few dozen showcases; mail-order business strong; growth only in video area; market seems saturated in present political situation.
5. small capital outlay and modest profits in theatres, with budgets never exceeding \$80,000 for Joe Gages features (L.A. TOOL AND DIE), all in 16mm; according to Gage, theatrical market allows only one or two major films a year; reruns endemic.
6. highly developed star system (Richard Locke, Al Parker), and brand-name auteurs (Toby Ross, Joe Gage), especially in theatrical features; also brand-name mail-order houses (Colt, Falcon).
7. overlapping of-porno constituency with gay community at large, side-by-side existence within the ghetto: Artie Bressan has made political documentary, porn features, and a legit feature; porn ads appear alongside feminist women's ads in Gay Community News; "danglie"* mogul Pat Rocco sang in the Metropolitan Community Church choir; theatrical star Richard Locke currently campaigning for AIDS research.
*danglie: a short-lived porno genre of the late sixties, after court decisions allowing nudity but before the hardcore explosion: hyperkinetic but flaccid nude males facing camera and doing a lot of jumping up and down.
8. flourishing presence of non-industrial erotica (i.e. amateur, folk, artisanal), e.g. readers narratives in Straight to Hell, classified ads culture, home movies, amateur beefcake, extension of pre-ghetto underground culture.
9. artistic avant-garde: historically an important role as producer of gay erotica in preliberation era (police harassed Kenneth Anger and beefcake studios equally); currently a much diminished but still visible role, e.g. Curt McDowell; Barbara Hammer as source of lesbian erotica.

Straight Male Pornography

1. straight male producer employs female models
2. large-scale industrial apparatus for production and distribution with lots of small-scale competition; pervasive presence of mafia and other multinationals, links to other branches of sex industry.
3. producer control, mostly non-union employees with low flat-rate; some performers in "legit" areas receive high rewards and occasional career crossover, e.g. Sylvia Kristel, *Pets of the Year*, etc.
4. still apparently a growth industry with 1000's of theatrical outlets and video boom, expansion continues into "legit" films (*LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER*), and spin-off industries.
5. huge capital outlays relatively common, especially in pseudo-legit area, e.g. *CALIGULA*, where films can cross over out of the combat-zone market; huge profits.
6. wide range of star and auteur recognition in legit softcore films and in "prestige" hardcore features
7. no straight equivalent; straight porn has no self-defined constituency or community base other than the straight male gender caste, extending across class, race and zoning divisions.
8. straight equivalent is marginal or industry adjunct, e.g. "*Playboy* Forum," advice columns, *Hustler* photos of readers' partners, swingers' newsletters, cable TV.
9. artistic avant-garde: less important historical role (e.g. *GEOGRAPHY OF THE BODY*, Brakhage's late-fifties fuck films); current role negligible, though Michael Snow has been censored in Toronto.

Relations of Exhibition

Gay Male Pornography

1. commoditization of private/individual sexual space (bedside stroke mags, home video); telephone sex services a recent extension.
2. theatrical, arcade and bookstore space as social terrain, meeting place and setting for sex
3. exhibition space as liberated zone, extension of the gay ghetto, as gay refuge from heterosexist territory; favored space for anonymous contacts and for individuals who are dysfunctional in bars and saunas
4. huge mail-order and rental video market is much more important than theatrical market; important glossy magazine industry. Strongest market away from gay ghettos.
5. in isolated areas, straight theatres and adult bookstores service gay community; in New York and elsewhere, cheap straight theatres service poor and minority gays.
6. porno theatres restricted to ghettos and combat-zones; glossies are mass distributed but far less accessible than *Penthouse*.

Straight Male Pornography

1. commoditization of private/individual sexual space, straight equivalent even more pervasive, e.g. pay TV, cable.
2. no equivalent: theatrical exhibition space is zone of terror for unaccompanied female potential partners, except for sex industry workers
3. no real equivalent in contemporary context: combat zone is extension of straight male domain. Remote equivalent to gay situation might be seen in straight males escape from family, respectability, and suburbia. Some women have argued for similar function for women: Lisa Orlando (pornography as first glimpse of freedom, aid in adolescent search for validation and pleasure and sexual autonomy); Ellen Willis (porn as protest against the repression of non-marital, non-procreative sex, resistance to a culture that would allow women no sexual pleasure at all); Deirdre English (porn district as small zone of sexual freedom).[\[3\]](#)
4. straight equivalent to mail-order market has all but disappeared except for specialty areas, e.g. fetish, SM; glossies are huge multi-national industry; video is eclipsing theatrical exhibition.
5. no equivalent
6. pervasiveness and respectability of straight male theatres; shopping center and neighborhood outlets in addition to combat zones; glossies omnipresent, iconography having long since seeped into popular culture and advertising.

Relations of Consumption

Gay Male Pornography

1. privatized, individual masturbation aid, in all categories, including theatrical and arcade.
2. accessory to sexual relations between strangers and between familiars; theatres and arcades are lively meeting and sex places, saunas often have film or video rooms
3. the spectators positions in relation to the representations are open and in flux. These include: non-viewing with the images functioning as background visual muzak; direct unmediated look at image-object, especially in solo-jerk films; look mediated by narrative — spectator's position fluctuates or is simultaneously multiple, among different characters and types, roles, etc. Spectator's identificatory entry into the narrative is not predetermined by gender divisions; mise-en-scene does not privilege individual roles, top or bottom, inserter or insertee, in any systematic way.
4. gay male spectator habitually invited to identify narratively with victimization and/or penetration of the Self, i.e. of gay male, often by straight male. Eroticization of victimization or submission is most common in noncommercial porn, e.g. of 110 randomly chosen *Straight to Hell* anecdotes, 30 eroticized active role on the part of the narrator, 33 were submissive or victimized, 43 were both or interchangeable.

5. gay porn functions as progressive, educative or ideological (consciousness-raising) force, as challenge to self-oppression, the closet and isolation (Oklahoma is reputedly the strongest mail-order market); gay porn often serves as isolated teenager's first link to community.
6. gay porn functions as potential regressive force, valorizing sexism, looks-ism, size-ism, racism, ageism and so on, as well as violent behaviors; reinforces the closet by providing anonymous, impersonal outlets? legitimizes straight-identified self-oppression (of 110 STH anecdotes, 43 valorized straight-defined men as erotic object)?

Straight Male Pornography

1. privatized, individual masturbation aid, as above
 2. only rarely a similar phenomenon (motel movies?); probable use as accessory to prostitution?
 3. spectator's position tends to be rigidly gender-determined; in all categories, straight male spectator looks at female image-object, without mediation of straight male narrative surrogates (*Penthouse* centerfolds) or with (narrative features). Mise-en-scene privileges women's roles and visibility, i.e. as insertee, whether active/top or passive/bottom. This is why close-up fellatio scenes (cock as prop) are far more common than male-female cunnilingus (a gynephobic taboo-also operates here). Male figure has far less visual weight even in films headlining male stars such as Harry Reems. In hardcore, the privileging of women's roles is more emphatic than in classy/crossover softcore (e.g. *PRIVATE LESSONS*, *LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER*) because of strong narrative lines and appeal to women spectators (still such privileged male personae tend not to have cocks). (For further research: am I wrong in assuming that straight men's fantasies never flirt with forbidden corners of the text? Do they never project on/identify with the female roles? I'm afraid to ask any.)
 4. straight male spectator habitually invited to identify narratively with victimizer, to eroticize victimization of the Other (woman-object), only rarely of the Self, as in the specialty dominatrix subgenre (*ILSA*, *TIGRESS OF SIBERIA*). (Distinction must be made between passive fantasy where narrative subject is in control (almost all fellatio scenes in het porn) and submissive fantasy where narrative object is controlled or victimized, extremely rare in mainstream het porn).
 5. no strict equivalent; historically stag movies had a loosely parallel function in sex-repressive society, as instruction and initiation for the dominant gender/sexual-orientation caste; in traditional Japanese society, pillowbooks had an important and respectable educative function.
 6. straight porn can/does legitimize phallogentric, gynephobic, alienated, and violent attitudes and behavior; the "throwaway" woman.
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Relations of Representation: Depicted Sexual Practices

Gay Male Pornography

1. gay men fuck and suck and are fucked and sucked, etc., in a wide range of combinations and roles not determined by gender; sometimes roles are defined by sexual practice, body type, age, class, race, or by the enunciation of sexual orientation (office employee short of cash for date with girl friend fucks gay boss for money), but just as often this is not so.
2. no equivalent to straight convention of lesbian sex, except perhaps relations among men narratively defined as "straight"
3. in longer films, overall structure is as often purely episodic as climactic, e.g. J. Brian's FIRST TIME AROUND is a narrative daisy chain (A fucks with B fucks with C fucks with D fucks with A).
4. within individual sequences, usually a climactic escalation of sexual practices, i.e. fucking after sucking, with staggered ejaculations of all participants as a drawn-out climax; rigid convention of external ejaculations of all participants as a drawn-out climax; rigid convention of external ejaculation often followed by ingestion of semen. Same for loops and short films.
5. taboos: on male-female sex (Joe Gage's use of het coupling to establish straightness of a character is exception that proves the rule); on effeminacy, age, obesity, and drag (except in specialty materials or nonsexual roles, e.g. a drag queen in Wakefield Poole's BIJOU leads butch construction worker down into labyrinthine sexual underworld).
6. in loops or short films, narrative is often solo performance, masturbation or just posing which can be either or both active (tense, upright) and/or passive (supine, exposed, languid, available). Same conventions in glossy centerfolds or photo-spreads. Solo performance materials establish eye contact with spectator.
7. sexual practices stigmatized and often technically illegal are standard routine component in all categories: porn shows what legit media deny, suppress and stigmatize.
8. violence and rape, consensual and non-consensual, among gay men or perpetrated by characters defined as straight, is not uncommon.

Straight Male Pornography

1. straight man (two or more men are less common because of rigid taboo on intermale sexuality) fucks and is sucked by one or more women in a more limited gender-defined range of roles and combinations, e.g. women frequently are active partners (i.e. aggressive fellators) as well as passive insertees, but the range of roles is quite rigidly prescribed. Would non-sexist hetero porn for men or women have the role-flexibility of much of gay porn?
2. relations between women a routine formula, usually as prelude to

- entry of phallus
3. features tend more often to be linear or climactic in narrative structure.
 4. roughly the same climactic escalation of sexual practices as above, more compressed because of scarcity of ejaculators (the gay taboo), and limited positions; straight men come outside too. Same for loops and shorts.
 5. taboos: on intermale sex; also on age, obesity, deviation from' perceived ideals of femininity and beauty, etc.
 6. same solo-stroke or posing conventions as above, except that poses are exclusively passive (supine, spread, seated, squatted, orifices offered, etc.). Same eye-contact conventions.
 7. illegal and stigmatized practices (other than violence) only in fringe subgenres such as kiddie-porn or scat, etc.; het porn shows what legit media imply, simulate, or present "tastefully."
 8. violence and rape is common, consensual and non-consensual, perpetrated on women by straight men, rarely vice versa except in dominatrix subgenre; in some respectable cryptoporn, violence is perpetrated by gay man or transsexual/transvestite, e.g. *LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR*, *DRESSED TO KILL*.

(Continued on [next page](#))

Men's pornography: gay vs. straight, page 2 by Tom Waugh

TOPOGRAPHICAL COMPARISON, CONTINUED

Relations of Representation: Common Narrative Formulae

Gay Male Pornography

1. Five common elements:
(Kathleen Barry's list quoted from Kronhausen can be applied):[\[4\]](#)
 - a. *seduction* (often of straight man)
 - b. *profanation* (*Straight to Hell* is full of clerical motifs, but in post-clerical society the more common rendition is simple anti-authority — e.g., coach rims star athlete, sailor fucks officer)
 - c. *incest* (*Straight to Hell* is full of father and older brother fantasies; less omnipresent in commercial porn but still very common)
 - d. *permissive-seductive parent* (one film, title forgotten, depicts furtive father coming out at same time as teenage sons).
 - e. *defloration* (in gay porn one version of this is initiation, another is the converse of the term — *being* deflowered).
2. element unique to gay porn is "coming-out," gay male assumption of gay identity and sexual practice; shedding of straight male identity or conversion of straight male can be part of this (Joe Gages KANSAS CITY TRUCKING COMPANY).
3. intra-narrative voyeur or photographer is common
4. doctor or sex researcher as narrative mediator
5. straight-identified institutional setting, e.g. ranch, hospital, school, military, construction site (of 110 STH anecdotes, 30 are situated in this way); military settings especially common.
6. sex-for-pay, especially straight hustlers and rough trade
7. subversive humor (penile salute from Marine's uniform in Jean-Claude von Itälie's AMERICAN CREAM).
8. back-to-nature, fucking in the forest or posing in the desert.
9. documentary gimmick, e.g. Peter de Rome's Super 8 sex on the subway, or location shooting and nonprofessional actors in Toby Ross's BOYS OF THE SLUMS with acne and failed erections.
10. public sexuality a common element, e.g. glory holes of TAXI ZUM KLO a frequent formula. 24 of 110 STH anecdotes take place in toilets and 38 in other public spaces such as parks, cars, and rest stops.

11. violence/rape as vengeance (at least one example, Joe Gage's HEATSTROKES)
12. rape of unconscious (Curt McDowell's NUDES) or of bound victim. Gang rape, passive fantasies of rape are common in STH, often with straight perpetrators
13. rape victim comes to like it
14. SM, fisting, gadgets, fetishes (boots most common, followed by jock straps: rapid escalation of these motifs in seventies hardcore has apparently leveled off; a recurring minor presence in mainstream glossies (*Blueboy*), dominant in other specialized mags (*Drum* the most common SM glossy)
15. take-offs of legit media, especially with film titles e.g. LAST TANGO IN HOLLYWOOD
16. racial difference as narrative angle: rare in hardcore features where nonwhite men often appear without racial enunciation. Subgenre of beefcake and hardcore mags specializing in racial difference presumably for white clientele (but question of race of producers and consumers is for future research), e.g. "Boys of Puerto Rico." 22 of 110 STH anecdotes had some kind of racial enunciation, frequently with black narrator.
17. class enunciation relatively common, e.g. BOYS OF THE SLUMS; blue-collar fantasies are omnipresent.
18. cock-size narrative gimmicks constructed around certain stars and in titles, e.g. THE BIG SURPRISE.
19. as a general rule, theatrical films have a more important narrative content than straight equivalents (Wakefield Poole's *BIJOU* flopped because it was criticized for "too much story.")

Straight Male Pornography

1. These 5 elements are still basic to much straight male narrative porn, though capitalist competition has tended to expand the repertory. Profanation is less important, nuns having all but disappeared. Insatiable nymphomaniac seems to be a new formula, whether comic (*DEEP THROAT*) or moralistic (*DEVIL AND MISS JONES*).
2. remote equivalent without the distinct ideological tenor might be woman's realization of her true desire (*EMMANUELLE*, *DEEP THROAT*) or young male protagonist's assumption of his patriarchal sexual prerogatives (mostly in softcore such as *PRIVATE LESSONS*, *PORKY'S* or *SPRING BREAK*). Conversion formulae also present: lesbian is often converted by a good fuck; in *ROOMMATES*, gay man is similarly converted.
3. same reliance on intra-narrative voyeur or photographer as above.
4. same formula of doctor or sex researcher as narrative mediator.
5. straight male interest in all-women institutions such as convents and brothels is related but has different ideological tenor and is now less common.
6. shares gay interest in sex-for-pay same, especially brothels, though now less common than in classical stag films; recent twist is suburban housewife who has sex to pay bills.

7. humor not so evident, either prurient (guttural clitoris is DEEP THROAT) or flat (GONE WITH THE WIND-style chorus-line rape production number in porno musical BLOND AMBITION)
8. common in softcore (EMMANUELLE, LADY CHATTERLEY), less so in hardcore. Cheesecake, unlike beefcake, is usually interior.
9. not common; exceptions include French feature on porn star EXHIBITION, or Vietnam brothel sequence of HEARTS AND MINDS.
10. no straight equivalent since straight public sexuality is accepted social norm
11. violence/rape as vengeance relatively common e.g. Russ Meyer's VIXEN; an exception is THOSE NAUGHTY VICTORIANS where the rapist-protagonist is raped himself at the end by a (black) assailant hired by his earlier victims.
12. same narrative formula around sexual assault (woman hitchhiker trapped by car window and raped from behind); gang rape relatively less common because of intermale taboo.
13. extremely common in legit media as well as softcore and hardcore films
14. SM motifs more and more common in mainstream glossies (Hustler) as well as stable minority proportion of hardcore magazines, arcade materials and films; some osmosis of iconography into legit media, punk culture, high fashion, etc. Women usually bottom (e.g. SWEPT AWAY ..., THE NIGHT PORTER) but not always (MAITRESSE).
15. same pleasure in taking off on legit media, especially with film titles.
16. several racist subgenres of hardcore and softcore films and other categories where women and men are enunciated racially, e.g. "mixed combos, dozens of Thai EMMANUELLE-spinoffs. Mainstream glossies are very white.
17. probably less explicit, though no less prevalent through implicit and documentary codes, especially in cheaper mags and films. Maids are much less common than in classical and European films, often replaced now by secretary fantasies.
18. is straight male breast size fetishism equivalent to gay male cock size gimmickry?.
19. narrative content relatively less important

Relations of Representation: Extracting Some Ideological Essences

Gay Male Pornography

1. phallus obsession, the closeup a metaphor of corporal fragmentation and alienation; phallocentrism however not an explicit text in this fantasy universe where people not divided according to presence or absence of cock — everyone has one.
2. self-hatred, gay eroticization of victimization of self (some STH anecdotes eroticize abusive homophobic "dirty talk")

3. racism: third world beefcake constructs spectator-object relation that is exact parallel of racist organization of society
4. ideology of gay liberation: sex-positive attitudes, valorization of "coming out," acceptance of gay identity and community, challenge to masculinity; sex industry as economic base of autonomous, prosperous ghetto and therefore of political clout.
5. ideology of the closet: valorization of straight image reflect internalized homophobia, self-oppression.

Straight Male Pornography

1. phallocentrism: women as universally available caterers to pleasure of phallus
2. woman-hatred: women as deserving and willing victims, whose victimization is eroticized
3. racism: nonwhite women as exaggeratedly sexual slaves, nonwhite men as instruments of patriarchal revenge.
4. ideology of sexual liberation? view of straight porn as therapeutic social safety valve, as vehicle of sex-positive values, espoused by straight male apologists and profiteers, by some social scientists, by some women pro-sex or libertarian feminists.
5. closest equivalent of self-oppression here is not in straight male pornography, which has no significant female audience, but women's romance pulp (Harlequins); men's lib line emphasizes straight male porn's oppression of men as well as of women.

Towards a Summary: Porn as Index/Echo/Prop of Political Context

Gay Male Pornography

PLUS: Unlike straight male porn, gay porn does not directly and systematically replicate the heterosexist patriarchal order in its relations of production, exhibition, consumption, or representation. Kathleen Barry's assertion, "Homosexual pornography acts out the same dominant and subordinate roles of heterosexual pornography,"^[5] cannot be shown to be true of any of these terms. Produced by, depicting, and consumed exclusively by gay men, the fantasy universe of gay porn resembles the gay ghetto in its hermeticism as well as in its contradictory mix of progressive and regressive values, in its occupancy of a defensible enclave within heterosexist society. It subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values, providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, encouraging many sex-positive values and declaring the dignity of gay people.

MINUS. At the same time, the ghetto is part of as well as separate from heterosexist society. The patriarchal privilege of male sexual expression and occupancy of public space is perpetuated. The patriarchy is propped up equally by the reinforcement of the gay male spectator's self-oppression, by his ghettoization. Finally, capitalism's usurpation and

commodification of the private sphere is extended not threatened by gay commercial porn.

Straight Male Pornography

PLUS: Porn as "liberated zone," social safety valve, as visualization of women's desire, as vehicle of the sexual revolution?

MINUS. Gender-defined sexual roles and power imbalances, both within the narrative (woman as insertee, active or passive, woman as victim, woman as fetishized object of the camera) and outside of the narrative (woman as spectator), replicate the power relations of patriarchal capitalism and are thereby both its symptom and its reinforcement.

A REAL RAW PLACE

"I love the fact that I can't understand my films when I first make them. It feels like I'm making them out of a real raw place."[\[6\]](#)

Curt McDowell's *LOADS* (1980) is a 19-minute black-and-white gay porn movie that is so hot that it makes *KANSAS CITY TRUCKING COMPANY* feel like a three-hour Marguerite Duras film projected at half-speed. It is also a lot more than that, though this "more" amplifies the turn-on rather than legitimizes it.

Like most great works of eroticism, and like the erotic films of McDowell's fellow Bay Area homosexual, Barbara Hammer, *LOADS* is intensely personal, autobiographical, even confessional. The diary form tends to achieve a mixture of everyday images and fantasy overtones that is highly potent. As in the first-person anecdotes of *Straight to Hell*, the authentic ring of, "This is really true. I was really there," brings a vibrancy to even the tallest tale. The diaristic form also has a documentary graininess to it that enhances the impact, the spontaneity of camera twitches, the fragility of flares. Both Hammer's and McDowell's format is the low-budget independent non-sync-sound short film, an alternative form, borrowing from both documentary and experimental vocabulary, that knits well with an alternative eroticism. Slickness takes away from desire, Hefner's airbrushes notwithstanding.

Hammer and McDowell, however, live at opposite ends of the Bay. Her films have a Berkeley spirituality to them, even at her most carnal moments (the closeup labia-dabbling in *MULTIPLE ORGASMS*). Maybe it comes from her habit of linking eros to nature, whether it's the garden or the desert with all their iconographic associations in our culture; maybe it's the presence of a visible lesbian community throughout her films, the pervasiveness of sisterhood for all her obsessive egotistical sublime. With San Francisco-based McDowell, a cock is a cock is a cock. His landscape is the concrete of the streets, the filtered light of his non-residential-zone studio. But his physicality doesn't belong to the Castro,

except for the overtones of camp — it belongs more to the Mission. Unlike Hammer, McDowell is usually alone. The faggot fellowship is nowhere in sight, the clone ghetto somewhere over the horizon. His love-objects are the Other, the Straight Man.

In fact, in *LOADS*, it's six Straight Men who swagger through the frame. The film narrates the filmmaker's encounter with each of them, on the street or in parks, his offer to film them jerking off. They all consented (though of course the filmic record doesn't include those who refused nor any real or threatened violence incurred), and the six intermingled episodes/ vignettes of the film are built from the resultant posing and sex sessions in McDowell's studio.

Suddenly spectators find themselves embarrassed voyeurs both of McDowell's tricks with the six men, and of the men's tricks with the camera. The men strut about defensively, as if taunting the camera, or they lie back invitingly, staring vulnerably, trustingly into the lens. They undress and caress themselves, or allow the filmmaker to help. The camera sometimes embodies McDowell's point of view, crawling across the floor in submission for the blow, trembling as if in echo of the spectators' excitement. Or else it remains aloof on its tripod for a breather with the pretense of immediacy temporarily dropped. At other times when McDowell needs both hands, one of the subjects holds the camera, adding the frisson of subjective angle to the palpability of micro-closeups of flesh. This is participatory camera taken as far as it will go, filmmaking as fellatio. The editing preserves the feeling of participation and spontaneity, texturing the narrative lust with the temporal patterns of memory and obsession — echoes, stuttering, flashbacks. McDowell's half-confessional, half-conspiratorial voice-over adds to the complexity of the mosaic: "I wanted to be slung on his back, fucking him as he walked down the street."

In fact, McDowell doesn't fuck any of the men. And that's the point at which the film begins to expose "the raw place" of the filmmaker's desire and of our sexual culture as gay men of the post-gay-lib era. Like all eroticism shaped by a commodity- and image-enslaved patriarchy, McDowell's eroticism is deeply troubled, and troubling. I am speaking neither of the gospel of omni-pansexuality embodied in the gay male institution of tricking, nor of the objectification inherent in the image-making process in itself — at least not here. I am referring rather to the eroticization of the Not-Gay, the Straight Man. For some, it may be gratifying that the tables are turned. The straight man becomes erotic surface, objectified, both idealized and debased, the object of erotic obsession. It is an obsession frequently present in gay male pornography, as I've noted elsewhere, and an obsession that McDowell tackles head-on, exorcizing it and analyzing it as well as indulging it and perpetuating it:

"I have no idea why those straight men turn me on; I see that it's my own obsession — one of them."

"My real interest lies in things, like, I want to go on

expeditions, and always document the sexual aspect of things. Like *National Geographic* ..."

"... since much of (current norms of) homosexuality is based on guilt and shame, I think you can realize that guilt is what is turning you on."

"... I'm hung up on straight men because they're like virgins. They've never done it with another guy. I like them for fantasy. But I wouldn't want to see them 'turn gay,' to become my lovers."

McDowell, then, is quite deliberate in confronting the contradictions of his sexuality, of gay sexuality in its current incarnation, but he doesn't pretend to be able to understand them, nor to resolve them — without the spectator's help.

The types of men McDowell is attracted to are telling. They are macho, some body-builders, mostly working-class, a few with tattoos, — none with the idealized beauty of *Blueboy* pornstars but in fact almost parodies of our culture's stereotype of masculinity were they not ultimately so ordinary. Their sexuality, not surprisingly, is deeply alienated. Most depend on images to masturbate to, propped on one elbow, thumbing the glossy magazine photos of women, the perfect image of the ideal sexual consumer of the post-Hefner age. One man even rubs his cock into the crack of the centerfold during and after his ejaculation. Of others, McDowell manages to capture the comic absurdity as they strut around trying to look cool with their pants down around their knees. Of still others he succeeds in registering an unexpected tenderness, a haunting vulnerability that matches his own, an openness to this experimental intermale exchange that subverts our rigid labels of sexual orientation. At the moment of his final montage of all six protracted ejaculations, McDowell adds the sound of thunder to the already exaggerated heavy breathing on the soundtrack, a hint of parody that is just the right touch to top off the "expedition," this exposure of the male sexual drive. The male body is both celebrated and decorticated, the rites of masculinity are both indulged and subverted.

As for the spectator, caught up in a mix of desire and outrage, guilt and complicity, amused distance and involvement, his disturbance remains long after the excitement has dissipated. Not your usual pornographic film, designed for easy consumption and disposal. This is the direction we must pursue if we are to attain an eroticism worthy of our political ideals. I do not mean the reworking of fuck-film formulae with ideological discourse and politically correct sexuality, nor the legitimization of eroticism "artistically" through self-reflexivity or modernist editing (though we should not exclude possibilities inherent in either of these avenues). I guess I mean an alternative practice, a grass-roots pornography to counter the industrial pornography; an eroticism that enhances our pleasure in our sexuality by starting from the raw place we're in right now and by responding to that place, without defensiveness or complacency, but with honesty, questioning

and humor; a challenge to our sexuality as well as a celebration of it.

Notes

[1.](#) "Lesbians and Pornography," from transcript of workshop at the Pittsburgh Conference on Pornography 1980 in *off our backs* July 1980, p. 9.

[2.](#) Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York, 1981), p. 43.

[3.](#) Lisa Orlando, "Bad Girls and 'Good' Politics," *Village Voice* (Literary Supplement), December 1982, p. 16; Ellen Willis, "Who is a Feminist? A Letter to Robin Morgan." *ibid.* p. 17; Deidre English, "Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism," (with Amber Hollibaugh and Gayle Rubin), *Socialist Review*, No. 58, July/Aug. 1981, p. 51.

[4.](#) Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York, 1979), p. 207.

[5.](#) (*Ibid.*, p. 206.

[6.](#) Quotations by Curt McDowell are taken from interviews in *Gay News* (London) No. 229, p. 47 (by Jack Babuscio); *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, Pink Section, Feb. 8-14, 1981 (by Calvin Ahlgren); *Artbeat*, Dec. 81-Jan. 82, pp. 22-23.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Homo video

by John Greyson

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GAY VIDEO: THE PRESENT CONTEXT

Karla Jay and Allen Young's 1978 anthology *Lavender Culture* set out to discuss the role of gay people in the traditional arts, and examine our subculture and its relationship to mainstream culture. It did not include one article on film or video, reflecting both the lack of scholarship at the time, and the little autonomous gay film and video that had been produced. How time flies! In five short years, we've had a minor eruption of sensitive" gay films from Hollywood, a steady flood of gay features from Europe, several books, special supplements in JUMP CUT and *American Film(!)* and lots of critical writing in the gay and lesbian/feminist press. An honest-to-goodness Academic Conference was organized at UCLA January 1983, on the subject, where this paper was originally presented — sad to say, it was the only contribution on video.

Within the "video revolution" we are currently enduring, "homo video" means two things to most people: porn and video bars. Both are interesting subjects — both desperately, need critical analysis *right now*. Both will eventually get it, as video bars become a predictable feature of ghetto life. Another development which deserves critical attention is the fledgling attempts at gay cable that have come and gone in the past decade and are increasingly coming back, subsidized this time by gay entrepreneurial capital. Attempting to make a buck on the electronic marketplace, there may be tiny amounts of space at first for radical politics and experimentation. But if history teaches us anything, the door of the dollar inevitably slams shut first on those who believe that there is more to gay culture than Joan Crawford.

Within the context of the UCLA conference, it was significant that *critical* attention to gay media exerted itself in direct relation to production budgets, which in turn have a great deal to do with influence on the viewing public. MAKING LOVE, a Hollywood feature, commanded the scrupulous resources of two lengthy papers. Three avant-garde not-quite-lesbian-enough films, which were produced on

insignificant independent budgets, were dealt with in one paper. Since the average video artist spends no more than \$5,000 per project, I myself gave this paper, which critiques twenty tapes in twenty minutes.

My being the only voice of video inevitably turned my remarks into an apologia for the medium. Yet, much of the work I discuss is not very good. Nevertheless, its collective importance asserts itself in its overt opposition to dominant media culture. My remarks, therefore, fall outside the domain of traditional media criticism. Most critiques of mainstream film and television adopt a passive relation to the culture industry, assuming it to be untouchable. The industrial base that overwhelmingly determines mainstream representations is consequently ignored. Such analysis is reactive, skewering in minute critical detail that which is represented, without addressing in concrete terms how such representations are produced in the first place. In this kind of criticism, the effect of commercial culture on society remains mystified. On the other hand, any discussion of independent media (including video), which is produced outside of commercial capital, must address itself to its marginalization within the dominant culture, and hence address its means of production.

Homo video production over the past fifteen years can be divided into several categories, including pornography, documentaries, documents of meetings and marches, and TV shows (mainly no-budget cable access efforts on cable systems around the country). I limit myself here to a discussion of art tapes by men. This selection is hardly representative, reflecting the bias of my living in Toronto and New York for the past five years. A discussion of lesbian video art is a topic unto itself, and begs to be addressed, for women's use of video dominates the medium's fifteen-year history. Video's very emergence as an artistic and documentary tool used by the disenfranchised is inextricably linked to the current resurgence of the feminist movement. This movement informs most of the work I will discuss to a greater or lesser degree, particularly where sexual politics intersect with issues of representation.

The sort of video I will discuss does claim an agenda of artistic pretensions — it attempts to enlighten, to examine, to intervene, to raise consciousness and, above all, to question that consciousness. As an art form, it hovers illusively on the battleground of gay cultural production, claiming simultaneous allegiances with documentary, fiction, poetry, and painting, resisting treaties (and treatises), obtaining a dishonorable discharge from the United Nations of High Art. It plays double agent, desiring the lowbrow working class audience of television and the high-brow bourgeois rigor of academic theory, ultimately betraying both sides and ignoring detente. Worst of all, it refuses to fall into line and march with the troops under the banner "gay video."

Various schools of video art have come and gone, including the decorative (image processing), the conceptual (minimal, sculptural, environmental), the personal (autobiographical, story telling), and the mannerist (campy media takeoffs, usually performance based). The

critical wrangling of such labeling has never produced satisfactory categories or (heaven forbid) any dominant theory. Acknowledging the current plurality of approaches and techniques is the only acceptable generalization critics can still get away with.

The following video work for the most part places itself in relation to some existing cultural reality. Produced within the confines of a liberal art milieu, the tapes are exhibited in alternative galleries and avant-garde nightclubs. The tapes' audience is not gay, but an art world that obviously includes gay people but experiences the work within a discourse of fine art media production. This type of video audience has begun to change in the past few years. Gay film festivals and conferences, like Chicago Filmmakers' annual event, are introducing video sections and sidebars. The artists discussed generally use video in conjunction with other new media — performance, installations, photography, artists books, new painting and sculpture. Their budgets are small, and distribution is accomplished either through personal representation or a handful of video art distributors like Electronic Arts Intermix, The Kitchen, Video Data Bank, and Art Metropole, which sell/rent to museums, artists spaces and media centers. Critical recognition comes through visual arts journals and the alternative press, which tend to ignore or misinterpret gay themes. The gay press has rarely reviewed video, though it devotes many pages to straight mainstream cultural productions that traditionally are thought to interest a gay "sensibility" (e.g. Donna Summer, the opera).

Left in a critical vacuum, the challenges of these tapes, beyond being a highly unpredictable political smorgasbord, can perhaps be best illuminated by comparing so-called "gay video" to so-called "gay film." The latter is traditionally interpreted (excluding porn) as the narrative feature, and carries with it an inordinate debris of assumptions:

1. That a story will be told that includes gay characters, whom the (gay) audience can identify with and be seduced by;
2. That the plot will revolve, either centrally or incidentally, around the characters' sexual preferences and their actions determined by those preferences;
3. That the representation will be "realistic," further solidifying the identification of the audience with the characters portrayed;
4. That the resolution, accomplished through narrative closure, will represent through its characters something "meaningful" about being gay or lesbian.

All of the following tapes reject or question these various conventions of seduction, identification, realism and closure in favor of a new vocabulary that is often self-critical. They demand of the viewer an active participation in decoding their signals and structures, and they eschew passivity by inverting or parodying the expected.

THE TAPES: DILETTANTES FIGHT DIDACTICISM

Video encourages people to talk — point a camera at someone, and they

have to do something. Moreover, the camera changes people's relation to the microphone — suddenly they must not only think, but act. Since the early seventies, Rodney Werden (a straight man) has been interviewing people about their so-called "perversions." His subjects include a call-boy and a transexual. *BABY DOLLS* consists of a close-up short of a post-operative transexual painting her toenails as she describes her operations in clinical detail. Werden undermines the conventions of the TV-talk-show interview by consciously denying us the visual reality of this man-into-woman. All we're shown is a hand methodically applying color to nails, hand, and feet — denying the gender transformation that we desire to witness. The tape's tension, by not letting us see what we hear and are fascinated by, is turned back on us. We watch the superficial transformation of her toenails with a heightened disinterest, conscious that we have been cheated, but conscious also that the cheating" was constructed out of our own expectations.

I BET YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE (1981), by contrast, exploits the conventions of an armchair interview purposely to explode them. The tape's subject, a naked older man, calmly claims that he can fuck himself, and then proceeds (with towel neatly arranged on chair) to demonstrate. We are spared none of the details. Witnessing his self-penetration close-up, we have no choice but to imagine ourselves in the same position. Later, he demonstrates his predilection for adapted-short-wave-radio toys, which he tunes to various vibratory frequencies to bring himself to climax.

The tape is devastating. It should be played in every public school in the country. Its impact lies in the implicit collaboration between the subject and the producer — indeed, the subject controls everything that occurs. There is no possibility of exploitation, for Werden has refused to comment, moralize, or otherwise frame the experience of this very articulate gentleman: what you see is what you get, and I bet you ain't seen nothing like this before...

Ron Moule and Ieuan Rhys Morris' recent tape *NOTHING PERSONAL* consists of intercut interviews with six politically active gay men who address issues of masculinity. Their backgrounds (white, middle-class, intellectual) presuppose a discourse located within the milieu of the radical gay movement. While personal reminiscence figures centrally in the process, the men continually contextualize their own statements within that political framework, and within the framework of the tape itself. The "truth" of the documentary interview, to which this tape refers itself, is further deconstructed through a complex intertwining of the men's edited statements. No man can complete more than a sentence before the tape cuts to another speaker. In essence, the individual stories are woven together to create the anti-thesis of six discreet characters. The result, as with Werden, is thrown back at the audience. Since all traditional identification with any one of the six men is subverted, the cumulative effect of the discussion continually questions its own process, raising questions and denying resolutions.

Its insistence that its speakers cannot be reduced to "gay characters" places the tape in direct opposition to the classic formula utilized by the documentary film WORD IS OUT. Horses Inc., a Chicago-based intermedia group, chose to satirize that film more explicitly. Their 1980 tape GAY IS OUT proposes six stereotypes from the ghetto, including a deranged scout leader and a tough-as-nails dyke who all insist they're not gay. Scripted like a SCTV routine, the humor is obvious and hackneyed from the outset. In trying to expose the conformity possible in the gay subculture, the producers regrettably undercut themselves by conforming to tired TV comic routines that irritate more than amuse.

Peter Adair's (the director of WORD IS OUT) 30-minute SOME OF THESE STORIES ARE TRUE was commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and then censored by PBS, because the tape supposedly took too much artistic license too far. Three storytellers tell three ten-minute tales about men, masculinity, gender roles, and aggression. Their narratives are purposely jump-cut to death — the viewer can never forget that these tales have been re-told through Adair's adroit editing. A young Puerto Rican man proudly tells how he beat to a pulp in prison another man who made a pass at him. A nuclear plant engineer describes a power play during a jury session where he reversed the group's decision to uphold his masculine authority. Lucien Truscott of "Dress Grey" fame elaborates how at West Point he was continually fighting off the not-so-subtle advances of his commanding officer, Alexander Haig.

The tape's trick is revealed in the credits — one of the stories was scripted and acted, throwing the other two into question. PBS claimed their reason for killing the tape rested on Adair's misleading the audience — which was exactly the point of the tape, of course. PBS also went out of its way to claim that the upfront alligations concerning Haig in no way influenced their decision.

Many gay men claim this is not a gay tape because the characters all purport to varying degrees of straightness — yet the tape's analysis of power relations between men could only have been accomplished by a gay lib critique of such power relations. While the tape's didactic structure becomes wearing and the acted segment lacks credibility, STORIES remains an ambitious effort to skewer masculine aggression through exposing the lies we tell as stories.

Gilbert and George, two British artists, have over the past fourteen years executed an adroit, all-embracing spectacle out of the mundane. Through performances, photo murals, films and some tapes, they meditate on their self-created position in culture as "artists" reclaiming the everyday. One 1972 tape features them sitting in an English sitting room as the twilight comes, nursing glasses and proclaiming in increasingly slurred tones: "Gordon's makes us Very, Very Drunk." The subject is alcoholism, but the concept is an appropriation of the banal. By situating themselves in virtually everything they produce, as their own Gilbert and George personas, they implicitly insist that the art

world (if not the real world) take these two faggots seriously. Such a project, seen in its entirety, ultimately doesn't say very much to anyone, beyond its own attempt to simultaneously partake of and expose an artworld that manages to market even alcoholism under the guise of self-referential inquiry into the true status of the avant-garde.

Many video artists commence their careers (a loaded term, given the economics of this particular art form) with some form of image-making — and many try to integrate a strictly visual vocabulary into their work. Three artists from Canada will serve to illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of such projects to date. Michael Morris' *NARCISSUS* (1980) adopts a language of lush, erotic compositions featuring beautiful boys striking self-conscious poses. The charged tension comes from the boys' pseudo-seduction of the viewer as they sprawl on beds, exit and coyly return. Are they aware of us or only themselves? This highly proficient garden of objectified delights uses visual associations to titillate (signifiers of greek myths and subcultural cruising patterns), yet the artist ultimately lets the paradise remain a facile, pornographic enigma.

Paul Wong's *PRIME CUTS* is an extended commercial for that wonder drug — consumerism. His bevy of professional boy and girl models lounge their way through an endless summer of beach parties and boatrides. Everything is pimple-free and perfect, from the anesthetic electronic muzak soundtrack to the couture costumes. Yet the sexual ambiguities abound, when the boys shower together, or when the camera leaves a heterosexual couple entwined on the bed to discover a naked boy sunbathing on the patio. Such undercurrents only emphasize the banality of this toothpaste/deodorant fantasy, which is supposed to be Wong's point. Wong has captured the obvious exquisitely, yet in doing so only replicates what commercial TV does daily. Morris similarly delivers an appealing surface that is meant to seduce us self-consciously. Yet he, too, merely repeats what exists in mass culture, reproducing without comment those patterns and devices that are the lynch pins of commercial commodification.

In contrast, Nick Jenkins' *DESIRE* attempts a systematic if quirky analysis of the same subject - the homoerotic subtext of consumer youth culture. During the central sequence, an off-camera fashion photographer and visual researcher search through slides for album-cover inspirations. The images historically trace the emergence of the you-wanna-fuck-me-cause-I'm-a-straight-boy look, from fifties muscle mags through Calvin Klein. The intentional, often hilarious banality of the characters' remarks conceal sharp perceptions about the function of such multi-layered come-hither messages, while reinforcing the two characters' roles as *intentional* producers of such imagery. This sequence is too long, and the tape is too ambitious, given the complexity of the subject, but if it ultimately fails, it still achieves a much more articulate reading of boy/ youth commodification than either Wong or Morris' work.

Michel Auder's COUPLA WHITE FAGGOTS SITTING AROUND TALKING could be more accurately entitled COUPLA WHITE FAGGOTS GET THEIR HANDS ON A PORTAPAK. Resurrecting several assorted luses from the Warhol superstar stable, Auder with scriptwriter/star Gary Indiana painfully play out the neuroses of New York's "decadent" ghetto culture, displaying a rather naive fascination with ludes, cheap tricks, and big dicks. The plot is continually disrupted by the antics of Cookie Mueller, the SM dominatrix with numerous gubernatorial clients and a new-wave 12-year-old brat who deals in drugs and wordly wisdom. While Mueller's performance is by far the most accomplished in this relative world of impromptu self-absorption, she remains stuck trying to shock us, and she ends up looking as bored with her posturing as we are with Auder's pretensions. COUPLA WHITE FAGGOTS shares with other underground New York new wave "classics" (*à la* Eric Mitchell, Amos Poe, Scott and Beth B, Jim Jarmusch) a banality exceeded only by its incompetence.

Cohn Campbell, a Toronto artist and producer of over thirty tapes, has consistently used the contradictions of drag to explore contemporary socio-sexual neuroses. As THE WOMAN FROM MALIBU he adopts the blond wig and accoutrements of a disenfranchised suburban widow to tell disturbing tales of disillusionment. The camera remains close and static — he often shot these tapes by himself in his studio, turning on the camera and stepping into the frame. As Robin, a polyanna punkette who falls awkwardly from grace in MODERN LOVE and BAD GIRLS, he pushes the jejune-like charm of these homemade soap operas to their limits. One classic scene involves the camera (and hence us) as a photographer out to seduce Robin. Robin demurs, giggles, gets nervous and begins to disrobe — the construction of his femininity crumbles before us. Yet Robin's back is turned as "she" removes her bra, and our illusion is intact — sort of.

Two newer tapes employ dramatic progression more conventionally. Self-referential artifice is suspended in favor of a somewhat truncated illusion of reality, and identifiable gay characters are presented. In HE'S A GROWING BOY, SHE'S TURNING FORTY, a business woman — troubled by age, her husband, and her job — consoles an office-boy who's trying desperately to come out. In DANGLING BY THEIR MOUTHS, an obsessive European art critic (Campbell) seduces Canadian bisexual male artists only to lose her lesbian lover to cancer. Both tapes employ melodramatic confrontations. But these confrontations are sharply juxtaposed to discreet scenes where nothing ostensibly happens: the office boy in the bath, listening to a music box, or the lesbian lover reading from William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. In contrast, these scenes reverberate with understated implications.

Campbell's use of drag raises problematic questions. It is by no means straightforward. We are never allowed to believe in the illusions he purposes. Yet he does little to resolve his own gender-fuck, the photo session being one of several exceptions. Often his characters crossdress across age lines and social codes, yet they are played in ways that

preclude any visceral explication on our part. Conscious confusion is not the tape's central statement, though, which perhaps accounts for this ambiguity.

CONUNDRUM CLINIQUE, a shorter version of a longer two-channel work, tells the story of a nuclear scientist who discovers the joys of make-up after appearing on the TODAY show with Jane Pauly. The tape consists of direct-camera statements from the three characters — the scientist, his girl-friend/assistant, and the Venetian plumber who seduces him. Halfway through we realize they are reconstructing the crime — the girlfriend, sick in bed, discovers them fucking on the kitchen table, and thinks it's a robbery. She tries to hit the plumber, but kills the scientist instead. Their evidence" constitutes three accounts, not just of the event, but of repression in a nuclear (family) society.

WHITE MONEY, Campbell's latest work, discards the lengthy soap opera structure for a faster, tighter *modus operandi*. With no pretense to narrative order, the tape butts together monologues about sexual power and desire with explicit gay sex and lesbian SM. Lacking a storyline, the tape's confrontation with social taboos is cleaner, clearer. It hits harder at the very issue of literally representing such forbidden territory, admittedly without going beyond the surface to participate in the porn/sm debates that are raging. Campbell's work does not participate *in*, so much as respond *to*, the sexual agendas in the feminist and gay movements. A peculiar amalgam of Fassbinder minus the budget, Lothar Lambert minus the tight edits, and THE EDGE OF NIGHT with modernist distancing, Campbell's oeuvre is best understood as a barometer of societal confusion over sex and sexuality.

General Idea, a tripartite of media-savvy Toronto artists, have for the past decade pursued their eternal project, the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant. As an exercise in self-promotion-as-art, they manufacture mass media to live out a Situationist purgatory. Homoerotic references abound in their performance, video, and installation work, as well as in their irregular magazine *File*. However, gay content is assimilated within a context of consummate fetishes. The black leather, chains, doric columns, leopard spots, poodles, cocktails and hairstyles become metaphoric signifiers *à la* Barthes to symbolize the relation between consumer capitalism and high culture. In this work, the New Left goes New Wave.

TEST TUBE (1979) utilizes color-keying to situate a woman artist within this conundrum. Confused by the demands of the mass-market's masquerading as the elite, she is caught in a prison composed on the color bars on the screen. Her story is intercut with commercials for drinks served in testubes in the Color Bar Lounge (just down the street from the Pavillion): cocktails for capitalists, anarchists, communists, artists and fascists.

"Fascism is a bottomless cup, but he's liable to forget his unquenchable thirst with this intoxicating brew," (sic)

intones the voice-over, as the cute blond boy drinks a glass of milk and gets a white Hitler moustache. The group's wit, laced with complex puns and triple entendres, is often delightfully seductive. Less clear is their own willing collusion with the culture industry they so gleefully critique. Though they often have quite sophisticated observations to make about perversity in a repressive society, their rejection of contemporary sexual political discourse in favor of privileged postmodern irrelevance ultimately undercuts their project's interest. In having their cake and eating it too, they leave little but the crumbs for us.

THE LOVE SHOW, a recent tape by London artist Stuart Marshall, inverts a plethora of BBC formats to construct a loose series of scenes detailing the power relations between men and women, gays and the police, and media and its newsworthy public. The tape opens with an officer interrogating a mother about her son, who has been picked up on a secluded beach with another man. Their conversation consists of contradictory clichés. Though the content is different, we can easily fill in the blanks following the formulae of narrative construction. Later, the mother is interviewed by a reporter. In the middle of their cross-purpose questions and answers, the sound disappears. A moment later, the reporter looks down and gestures that his batteries have failed. Another scene involves a seduction in an undressed TV studio (cables akimbo), where a man skillfully manipulates a woman into accepting his ride by first insisting that she isn't liberated and then by accusing her of fearing rape. They both analyze each other's positions. She realizes she is trapped in a no-win situation, whereby both her refusal or acquiescence ultimately will contribute to the inevitable crime.

Marshall demands that the audience play an active role in this work, consciously taking apart the implications of each segment to extract meaning. Nothing can be read literally. In a sense, like Campbell and General Idea, Marshall uses mannerism continually to "quote," or he references his media constructions within our larger cultural experience. In subsequent and even more complicated work, he juxtaposes a wealth of material from medieval history, Marxist, and Freudian theory, and contemporary feminist/gay liberation thinking to propose a matrix of intersecting questions regarding sex, power and capitalism. His methodology, eschewing didactic postulations in favor of contextualized queries, could be faulted for concentrating so heavily on the formal properties of communication. At times his constructions are too obtuse to be deciphered, even by the most fervent of devotees.

CONCLUSION

Marshall, Adair, Werden, Moule & Morris, Campbell and General Idea in various ways interrogate the assumptions of their audiences. They don't simply write off narrative as reactionary. On the contrary, they propose new methods of "storytelling" that come clean even as they lie, that demand viewers to walk down narrow narratives to see the chasms on either side, that create illusions specifically to reveal the machinations whereby those illusions are created, that multiply even as

they subtract. The videomakers place sexuality in jeopardy, but only along with everything else.

Obviously, there is a fine line between intentional ambiguity that illuminates, and ambiguity rooted in incompetence, trendiness (gender-blur, for instance) or outright political irresponsibility. One could argue, for instance, that Campbell participates in the voyeuristic tradition of commercial cinema by making most of his "deviant" characters tragic, lacking the independence and self-determination necessary to make them "positive" characters for us to identify with (his most recent tape is an interesting exception). We are distanced from the characters — often we laugh at them, and there is no clear signal telling us how to understand the social circumstances that make them ridiculous. However, Campbell isn't in the business of mass-producing role models. He's commenting more on such mass production within our culture by parodying it and by blocking such identification at every turn.

There are several concrete ways we can deal with this problematic species of our culture, "homo video":

1. Provide a critical context within the gay/ feminist press for discussion of this work as it relates to gay liberation;
2. Discuss this work in relation to other gay cultural production;
3. Program this work for gay audiences (in festivals, community screenings, and yes, the cable networks) along with gay "documentaries" and gay "dramatic narratives" (both film and video).

Similarly, video artists could claim their "responsibility" to the gay community in a variety of ways:

1. Make their technical skills available to record meetings, demonstrations, and cultural events;
2. Collaborate with existing media projects and community cable shows where appropriate. Naturally, there is a trade-off — gay artists' tapes could be programmed in exchange for their help. Too often, video artists who are also politically active in the gay movement remain in the closet as video artists, seeing their art as secondary to "real" political activity;
3. Network with other gay video artists to examine how their tapes are informed, or could be, by a gay political agenda that meets the community halfway.

Ultimately, the video work which I have described all suffers to a greater or lesser degree from its limited context, the art world. Many of the producers exist in a critical void that addresses only the formal properties posed by their work, leaving explicit content at a safe distance. Finally, the art world is a privileged sector that often basks in its own insularity and liberalism. If "morality" is to be an issue in media production, then it should inform the intentions of the producer and not be applied to the producer's illusionistic creations. Debating the morality of the character which Frank Riploh portrays in TAXI ZUM

KLOH is futile. Debating the intentions of Riploh the producer has merit. Similarly, artists who choose to address social issues should be answerable to whichever community they profess to speak for, but the community must be responsible to the needs and intentions of the producer.

In larger terms, we need to formulate a critique of our "gay" culture (including pornography) that fully understands the intersections between the economics and ideology of production. We can't determine the function of a PERSONAL BEST within society until we begin to appreciate the task that NOTHING PERSONAL sets for us. In many ways, studying these tapes and others would be a good place to start. They have already begun a critique of the elements that compose the dominant culture, and have begun to deconstruct those elements in favor of a self-determined arena of our own making.

Distribution information

- Rodney Werden, Colen Campbell, c/o V/Tapes, 379 Adelaide St. West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Ron Moule/Ieuan Rhys Morris, Stuart Marshall! c/o London Video Arts, 79 Wardour St., London W1, England.
- Horses Inc., 2857 Halstead, Chicago, Illinois 60657.
- Peter Adair, 2051 3rd St., San Francisco, California 94107.
- Michael Morris, c/o The Western Front, 303 E. 8th St., Vancouver, BC, Canada.
- Paul Wong, c/o Video Inn, 261 Powell St., Vancouver, BC, Canada.
- Nick Jenkins, c/o V/Tapes, Box 171, 55 McCaul St., Toronto, Ontario M5T 2W7, Canada.
- Michel Auder, c/o The Kitchen, 59 Wooster St., New York, N.Y.
- General Idea, c/o Art Metropole, 217 Richmond St. W., Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Not a Love Story The film and the debate

by Lisa DiCaprio

followed by a review of *Powers of Desire:
the Politics of Sexuality*

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Eight years ago, concerned with the proliferation of pornography and its effect on her daughter, Bonnie Klein began production on NOT A LOVE STORY: A MOTION PICTURE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY. The film was produced by the National Film Board of Canada and has accomplished Klein's goal of extending a discussion about pornography from the women's movement into the mainstream of Canadian politics, where state censorship of pornography is extensively enforced. However, NOT A LOVE STORY has also had the unexpected effect of generating tremendous controversy on issues of sexuality within the U.S. feminist movement. While the New York-based Women Against Pornography (WAP) lauded the film, *Village Voice* critic Ruby Rich denounced it as a "religious parable" which merges with right-wing views on sexual repression.^[1] In turn, a group of feminists from New York, including Robin Morgan (who appears in the film), wrote an angry response to Ruby Rich which questioned her basic commitment to feminism.^[2] Why all the furor?

NOT A LOVE STORY focuses on ex-stripper Linda Lee Tracey. Early in the film, we see Tracey performing her "Red Riding Hood" act, which she claims is not to be taken seriously. While Tracey has some reservations about stripping, she does not yet see pornography as harmful. NOT A LOVE STORY is essentially a description of Tracey's conversion. With Tracey and Klein, we journey through the world of pornography in all its forms: porn shops, sex booths, live sex shows, hard-core magazines, photographs of women in bondage. We hear directly from the workers in the porn industry; social scientists such as Edward Donnerstein who discusses the connection between violent pornography and violence against women; an owner of a chain of pornographic magazines who describes the proliferation of hard-core

pornography as a response to the women's movement; and U.S. and Canadian feminists who analyze the phenomenon of pornography.

As we tour the pornography district of New York's Times Square, Klein relates in voice-over statistics on pornography:

— Pornography is an eight billion dollar business, now larger than the music and film industries combined.

— There are four times more pornography outlets than McDonalds restaurants in the U.S.

Tracey carefully considers the arguments against pornography, measures them against her own experience, and finally emerges as a convert to the anti-pornography crusade. How could such a film be so objectionable to some feminists? The present debate on NOT A LOVE STORY has an intensity that derives from more than the film's content. In fact, debates on pornography and sexuality within the U.S. women's movement began long before the film's release here. NOT A LOVE STORY has been caught in the crossfire of this controversy, the evolution of which is described in an article, "A Report on the Sex Crisis," in *Ms. Magazine*, March 1982.^[3] In the article, Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs contend that

"the women's movement — and the culture at large — is going through a 'sex crisis' ... By the mid-seventies, pornography came to be *the* focus for a feminist discussion of sexuality."^[4]

As described in *Report on the Sex Crisis*, this discussion has many aspects, not the least of which is an attempt to define and create a new "feminist sexuality."^[5] Here I will focus on how the radical feminist interpretation of male/ female sexual relations informs NOT A LOVE STORY's perspective on pornography. Significantly, most of the experts on whom Bonnie Klein relies for a theoretical explanation of pornography are radical feminists: Robin Morgan, Kate Millet, Kathleen Barry, and Susan Griffin.^[6] While the feminists who appear in the film differ, the totality of their presentations puts forth a view of pornography which collapses a number of important distinctions, such as these:

1. Fantasy as represented in pornography and actual male behavior.
2. Psychological and physical violence against women.
3. Men as potential rapists and men as rapists.
4. Power wielded over women by men in different social strata and classes.

Also, the film fails to explore the connection between objectification of women in pornography and the exploitation of women's bodies generally in advertising, television and film.

Fantasy as represented in pornography

and actual male behavior

In her *Village Voice* review, Ruby Rich writes,

"If an analysis of porn were to confront its basic origin in the power relations between men and women, then it would have to drop the whole eroticism-versus-pornography debate and take on a far more complex and threatening target: the institution of heterosexuality ... Is it, perhaps more tolerable for the women who might attend NOT A LOVE STORY to come to terms with how her male lover's pornographic fantasy is oppressing her in bed than to confront, yet again, how his actual behavior is oppressing her in the living room ... or out in the world?"[\[7\]](#)

In fact, the WAP position often derives from a radical feminist conviction that pornography represents the essence of heterosexual relations in our society. Sexuality as expressed in pornography is regarded not as symbolic or as fantasy, but as an accurate portrayal of sexual reality.[\[8\]](#)

If pornography, indeed, constitutes an unvarnished depiction of the heterosexual experience, why do a multitude of cultural institutions exist solely to shape and mold women into the fantasy roles imagined by men? The very existence of these institutions indicates that an alternate social practice is reality. The fact that many men desire the dominant/submissive fantasy of pornography may show that women have long resisted such a masochistic practice in their daily lives — a point to be considered in more detail later in this review.

As Bonnie Klein has herself stated, pornography is only a symptom of a deeper social problem. However, reflecting the limitations of the anti-pornography movement, NOT A LOVE STORY does not actually probe pornography's social causes.

Pornographic images provide an easy target, but they only express the *externalization* of male fantasy. The film does not answer the prior question, "What shapes male/female relations as they presently exist?" The film's ambivalence on this issue is best represented by Robin Morgan, who states with obvious anguish, "I love men and I hate them." While the film regards pornography as reflecting the heterosexual experience, it also limits any "solution" to a heterosexual framework. From this perspective, Rich's point is well-taken: NOT A LOVE STORY does not examine heterosexuality as an institution bolstered by social, political, and economic forces, but only in terms of individual sexual relations between men and women.

Psychological and physical violence against women

By erasing the boundary between degrading *depictions* within violent images and actual acts of physical violence, the "pornography-is-violence-against-women" line tends to diminish real rape and battery.

Initially, this perspective made us take pornography more seriously as a form of psychological violence. However, intended or not, this way of framing the issue now has resulted in many women's shifting their activism to a campaign against images rather than against actual abusive male behavior. To focus primarily on pornography as violence reduces the attention paid to actual physical acts of violence committed by men against women in the form of battering or rape.

Men as potential rapists and men as rapists

In large part, the radical feminist equation, pornography is violence against women," rests on the assumption that a direct causal link exists between pornography's proliferation and rape: the male consumer of pornography automatically becomes the rapist as he merely "acts out" the relations of submission and domination portrayed on the screen. To agree with this analysis requires a leap of faith. As Susan Schechter points out in her book, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement*, all men are socialized to dominate women, but only some men will choose to exert this dominance by committing acts of physical violence against women. Schechter asks,

"What are the conditions that create violence against women? Women abuse here is an historical expression of male domination manifested within the family and currently reinforced by the institutions, economic arrangements, and sexist division of labor within capitalist society ... Only by studying social and historical relationships within the family can we reveal the meaning and purpose behind battering."[\[9\]](#)

For its part, NOT A LOVE STORY does not really explore the multitude of factors responsible for male violence. Instead, it merely asserts that a connection exists between pornography and male violence. To this end, Edward Donnerstein appears in the film to explain that eight out of ten factors that increase aggressive male behavior are present in violent pornography.[\[10\]](#) No further scientific evidence is brought to bear on the subject. The argument assumes a deterministic correlation between stimuli from the environment and human behavior.[\[11\]](#)

Pornography is not neutral. It does influence male behavior, but is part of a whole array of cultural institutions which create a climate in which the physical degradation of women is seen as a social norm. Pornography is only one of a number of social props which support the ideology of male domination.

Power wielded by men over women in different social strata and classes

Klein, a Canadian, filmed NOT A LOVE STORY primarily in New York City. And there, she focuses in a limited way on the highly visible 42nd Street area. While the owner of a sex shop may state on screen that his clientele consists of "all types and classes of men," wealth provides for

some men a more discreet means of access to women's bodies than 42nd Street or the "combat zone." While most are limited to purchasing a quick glimpse in a sex booth for a quarter or a prostitute for fifteen minutes to an hour, other more privileged men can afford highly privatized sexual experiences for an entire evening.

Such experiences can include purchasing expensive videotapes or hiring prostitutes for the night. More than 12 years ago, the world of call girls was the subject of the film, KLUTE. Although KLUTE preceded the contemporary feminist discussion of sexuality, the perspective it adopts on prostitution is actually more advanced than that of NOT A LOVE STORY on pornography. KLUTE explores the complexities of what motivates women to enter and/or remain in the sex industry, while NOT A LOVE STORY serves to shut down debate on this question.

The narrative in KLUTE, generally described as a psychological suspense thriller, centers around the prostitute Bree Daniels/Jane Fonda. There is a search for the murderer of a businessman who had frequented prostitutes, including a friend of Daniels. This search sets into effect a chain of events which requires Daniels to examine her own sexuality. The film shows the economic as well as the deeply personal factors which have kept her in prostitution. Daniels is the victim of a social order which does not value her, and she is also her own agent.

Numerous articles have been written on KLUTE. They consider how it treats sexuality, the woman's assertion of an independent identity, and romantic involvement. Bree Daniels ambiguously chooses to leave New York to live with Klute, but does not have a conversion like Linda Lee Tracey in NOT A LOVE STORY.[\[12\]](#)

For our purpose, we should note that NOT A LOVE STORY presents *all* men, irrespective of class, as wielding equal power over women. That analysis dismisses seriously examining class issues as they relate to pornography's production and consumption. The film focuses on the most repulsive aspects of the industry, while it exempts from inquiry and condemnation that industry's more hidden but equally exploitative forms.

The objectification of women in pornography and the media

NOT A LOVE STORY focuses on pornography and thus leaves us without a means of understanding more general and perhaps more insidious depictions of women. The film ignores media's role in shaping female desires and behavior to conform to male fantasies. And it never satisfactorily answers the prior question: What is pornography?

To concentrate on pornography to the exclusion of other images places an obstacle in the way of fully understanding sexual objectification in our culture. For example, what are we to make of a movie such as FRANCES? Here we have a conventionally beautiful, extremely vulnerable woman who is shown experiencing unmitigated suffering for the duration of the film. The film portrays Frances Farmer as the

ultimate victim, the damsel in distress who is never rescued but is finally destroyed by Hollywood, the medical establishment, and conservative politicians. While the story is based on real life, when women see such a film, in which there appears to be no way out, they often identify with the helplessness and resignation. This is not pornography in the narrow sense of the term, but one can begin to feel voyeuristic in being shown Frances' ever-downward spiral.

If one of the central themes of pornography is domination and submission, FRANCES exploits this theme even more artistically and profoundly than pornography. By focusing on images whose specific purpose is sexual arousal, the WAP position and NOT A LOVE STORY ignore such subtle and perhaps more insidious imagery of women.

While a film such as FRANCES provides an example of female victimization, there are other ways in which the media shapes female sexuality in our culture. For example, unexplained in NOT A LOVE STORY is the relation between such magazines as *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*. What is the specific function of each? How do these magazines differ in how they exploit women? According to Bonnie Klein, NOT A LOVE STORY did not deal at any length with how advertising exploits women's bodies because most women already know that. However, in explaining pornography, we must also demonstrate how the media shape female desire to conform to male fantasy and prescribe a norm of submission and dominance. As a further contradiction, standards of the "ideal" woman vary according to different historical periods and may even conflict within the same decade. Sometimes this reflects opposing political trends. For example, contemporary media use portrayals of the independent, "liberated" woman as well as more traditional/ reactionary ones. These reactionary images show women as mere extensions of men without any autonomous existence or desire for an autonomous existence. Such appeals to an older concept of the "desirable woman" testify to the current rightwing backlash, and an example of that regression can be seen in the promotional statement for the remake of Godard's film, BREATHLESS. The ad has a photograph of Richard Gere, a woman, a rose, a gun, and the words, "He's the last man on earth any woman need ... and every woman wants."

More interesting to analyze, however, are portrayals of the "liberated" woman of the 1980s. In her film review, "A Subject for the Seventies," Charlotte Brunsdon examines the construct of the "independent" heroine as exemplified in such "new" women's films as ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, THE TURNING POINT, JULIA, and AN UNMARRIED WOMAN.^[13] Brunsdon says that the creation on screen of the heroine of the 80s followed the growth of a new female "target" audience. A number of socio-economic factors contribute to shaping such an audience: the role of women in the economy, changing patterns of marriage and divorce, the increasing availability of birth control, and the impact of the women's movement. Brunsdon calls the new audience the "Cosmo Girl" of the 80s:

"... white, youngish, heterosexual, and an aspirant professional, Cosmo Girl aspires to the sexual satisfaction that was connotatively denied to the 'career girl' of the 60s. Moving into the 80s, Cosmo Girl has options and makes choices. However, her new subject position is potentially contradictory, retaining femininity, while moving into traditionally masculine modes (alert, aggressive, ambitious). There is thus a constant tension in the way that she must always be desirable (feminine), as well as desiring." [14]

Brunsdon goes on to deal in depth with AN UNMARRIED WOMAN's contradictions. The film considers being single as an acceptable status for women and confronts the social stigma attached to women's having sex outside marriage. However, the film keeps certain options from the heroine. In particular, she remains heterosexual and attached to a man, thus dismissing the possibilities of not relating to men at all or of relating sexually to women. The film's ending is ambiguous. Saul (Alan Bates), a painter, decides to leave for a summer in Vermont while Erica (Jill Clayburgh) chooses to remain behind. As a last gesture, Saul hands Erica a huge painting and drives off. She is last seen stumbling through the streets of New York with it, a scene which Brunsdon interprets as symbolic of Erica's new state of "semi-paralysis." Brunsdon concludes,

"Although the film has produced a marginalization of marriage which makes it impossible for Erica to go with Saul, to be his, the construction of Erica makes it difficult for her to do anything else. In the same way that the film is supremely ambiguous in its sexual politics — criticizing the institution of marriage and taking the 'impossibility' of romance seriously, yet constructing an unmarried woman who signally fails to do anything but find another man — so the image seems to represent Erica choosing independence, but at the same time shows her made impotent by a male gift." [15]

Pornography does not merely entail the most blatant and unvarnished form of exploiting women's bodies. It is also a medium which influences as well as is influenced by larger cultural institutions (television, film, fashion magazines, etc.) in establishing society's sexual norms. As Barbara Ehrenreich shows in her new book, *The Hearts of Men*, [16] the "liberated" *Playboy* male necessarily requires his female counterpart in the form of the "liberated" woman. An analysis of how the so-called "sexual revolution" has affected women's social position is beyond the scope of this review. [17] However, my main point here is that pornography primarily affects *male* and not female behavior. More insidious mechanisms for actually controlling female sexuality come from media institutions specifically aimed at a female audience, for these more directly affect how women's sexual desires are shaped and internalized. Any campaign which specifically focuses on pornography is, in a sense, striking at a displaced political target. It has the built-in limitation of calling on men to change — either in the form of publishers'

exerting self-censorship, laws on sexually explicit material being strengthened,[\[18\]](#) or men's refusing to purchase pornographic literature. A more expedient media-related strategy would be to analyze popular images of women that serve to define and channel women's sexuality within a male-defined framework.

A discussion of how the media objectifies women leads automatically to the question: What is pornography? Can it be defined? Or does pornography exist merely in the eye of the beholder? Unfortunately, *NOT A LOVE STORY* presents pornography as a static phenomenon, one that can be defined irrespective of any particular context. The film defines *pornography* by its Greek root, "depiction of sexual slaves" as contrasted to *eros*, "sexual love." When we examine concrete examples of pornography, these definitions seem inadequate and misleading.

Three basic criteria come into play when we attempt to define literature or film as pornographic: *intent*, *context*, and *viewer*. A variation in any one of these three variables will significantly alter the impact of the material at hand. Here are some examples.

INTENT: *Playboy* is a good example of literature the specific purpose of which is men's entertainment and sexual arousal. Most of the photographs specifically depict women in submissive positions. However, some photographs have a more neutral character and can assume for women an erotic quality if seen in a context other than a magazine intended for men.

CONTEXT: On the other hand, when taken out of context, the lovemaking scenes in the recent films about lesbians, *PERSONAL BEST* and *LIANNA* could very well assume a pornographic character, especially if they were part of an ordinary heterosexual pornographic film as the obligatory "lesbian scene."

VIEWER: Finally, how are we to analyze the promotional material used for, and pornographic images depicted in *NOT A LOVE STORY* itself? That material would be seen very differently by an all-female audience as opposed to a mixed male-female one. *NOT A LOVE STORY* attracted men drawn to the film as voyeurs.

In her review, "NOT A LOVE STORY: Feminism and Pornography," Jill McGreal writes,

"NOT A LOVE STORY is a film about pornography which is itself pornographic ... Having leading feminists talk about pornography was not strong enough to offset the interspersal between these interviews and progressively more offensive pornographic material."[\[19\]](#)

The main promotional photography for *NOT A LOVE STORY* reflects how weak the film's feminist analysis was about its own explicit display of pornography. In the ad, we see Linda Lee Tracey thinly clad in a revealing slip and turned toward pornography photographer Suze

Randall. The two appear to be immersed in a conversation. In the film, Tracey volunteered to be photographed by Randall so as to experience objectification. In the photo, director Bonnie Klein stands to the left and observes with detachment other women's interaction. The real protagonists are Randall and Tracey, the two participants in the pornographic industry. Klein represents the theoretical overview and voice of authority, but here she seems the outsider.

This quality of expert as outsider pervades the film. A question worth asking is why the film did not give Tracey responsibility for the voice-over and basic narrative. Rather, it makes her the object, the raw material for the experts to convert. As has been noted, Tracey assumes all the "risks" in the film. She must reveal herself both emotionally and physically, not like the expert feminists who, although they may speak with passion on the subject, nonetheless, retain an air of reserved authority.

For many women, NOT A LOVE STORY undoubtedly provides new insights. Although the material presented in the film is no more revealing than material available in various slide shows used in the women's movement, the film has succeeded in reaching a wider audience. To what extent, however, does the film's perspective serve to confuse as well as to clarify? While NOT A LOVE STORY presents valuable information, it also reduces the issue of pornography to its lowest common denominator and eliminates areas of justifiable dispute. The film has a one-dimensional analysis, one which only discusses pornography within the confines of sexual politics and fails to consider the question within a social/historical context. While there is educational value in showing the violent imagery in contemporary pornography, the net effect of NOT A LOVE STORY is to present a view of women as essentially victims of male, heterosexual culture.

CHICKEN RANCH

An alternative to NOT A LOVE STORY's approach to the sex industry is the surprisingly entertaining and non-judgmental, 90-minute documentary CHICKEN RANCH. Produced in 1982, it focuses on the women prostitutes at a legal brothel in Nevada, the only state in the U.S. to have legalized prostitution. Located 50 miles from Las Vegas and open 24-hours-a-day, Chicken Ranch draws its clientele from throughout the world.

On arriving at Chicken Ranch, customers see a "line-up" of at least 15 women. Once the men select a prostitute, they choose from an array of possible sexual services, each with a price tag. Special equipment and rooms are also available, such as the V.I.P. Room (\$1,000) with the Passion Chair, which allows for no less than 37 positions. Business at Chicken Ranch is conducted in a very perfunctory manner. At one point, Connie complains about "cheap men who want everything." She explains,

"They say, 'I want everything, the whole works.' I say, 'You

can't have the whole works for \$50." [\[20\]](#)

Co-directors Sandi Sissel and Nick Broomfield spent over twelve weeks filming at Chicken Ranch. During this time, they witnessed and recorded a number of emotionally revealing scenes, which provide some insight into the complexities of prostitution. While NOT A LOVE STORY seems to lack spontaneity (the script centers on Tracey's predictable conversion), CHICKEN RANCH allows the women to present the diversity of their experiences at the brothel. In fact, the documentary fascinatingly depicts the various relationships which exist between the customers, prostitutes, owner, and the Madame.

Fran Kotecki, the Madame, must enforce the owner's rules but at the same time acts as a surrogate mother, sometimes stepping in to shield the "girls" from abusive men. Fran states firmly to a customer,

"Our girls do nothing for \$20. You know we're considered one of the best houses. Look at her. Isn't she worth more than that?"

"The Girls," as they are referred to by Fran, average 21 years of age. They sometimes earn up to \$2,000 a week, which is split in half with the management and out of which \$140 must be paid in room and board. There are adverse affects on the women from working at the brothel. For example J.J., who originally worked as a cosmetologist but was unable to earn an adequate income, finds that the employment at Chicken Ranch exacts too high an emotional price. She confides,

"I really need to get out of here. I need to get out of the business, period, because it's messing me up emotionally. I'm getting a very callous heart from it ... the tension. I don't know, it's become oppressive tension ... after three solid weeks of work, being locked up 24 hours ... you feel like a machine."

Walter Plankinton, the owner of Chicken Ranch, has become a millionaire and is firmly committed to the business. Walter regards himself as a moral man providing a vital service.

To French journalists, he remarks, "This place is a matter of public necessity and public conscience." At Thanksgiving dinner, Walter says grace: "This may be a brothel, but I don't think there's anybody here who doesn't believe in God." Walter is a stern disciplinarian who often calls the women to task for not having sufficient enthusiasm: "Remember, the customer is King." At one point, Walter lectures Connie privately, pointing out that men pass her over at the Line Up.

"It must be your attitude that's changed. Maybe we can put our heads together so you can truly radiate confidence in yourself."

CHICKEN RANCH has comic relief, but it is grim humor. One of the

most memorable scenes is when customers arrive early in the morning following the Thanksgiving night celebration. Two of the women are rudely awakened by the Madam and in their bedraggled state stand in the Line Up. Still only half-awake, they proceed with the business at hand. This scene illustrates in a forceful way how prostitutes must sever mind from body to serve as a receptacle for male pleasure.

NOT A LOVE STORY implies that the "solution" to pornography would be women's exodus from the pornographic industry with conversions like Linda Lee's. CHICKEN RANCH adopts no such note of finality. Instead it makes visible the women's ambivalence about their vocation and/or decision to seek an alternative. Consequently, CHICKEN RANCH is more effective than NOT A LOVE STORY in exposing the consequences for *both* men and women living in a society in which men are the buyers and women the sellers of sexual gratification.

Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality

by Lisa DiCaprio

Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stanswell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: New Feminist Library, Monthly Review Press, 1983) 483 pages.

A relatively recent contribution to the current debate on sexuality is the anthology *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. *Powers of Desire* is not an especially balanced collection; most of the articles fall within the "anti-WAP" (Women Against Pornography) camp, to the extent that any such clearly defined camp exists. The articles combine history, anthropology and contemporary feminist theory to emphasize the point that sexuality is a social construct, not an immutable phenomenon.

In the introduction, the editors pose the question,

"Why write about sex? Sex is everywhere. Why add to the tawdry glut?"

To this they answer,

"To skirt sexual issues now, given current political conditions, is to cede this crucial territory to those who have organized precisely toward the end of silencing feminism and the lesbian and gay movements."

A number of the contributors to *Powers of Desire* openly warn that a narrowly conceived campaign against pornography can turn into a sexually repressive movement. For example, in "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in 19th Century Britain," Judith Walkowitz draws a parallel between contemporary anti-pornography groups and the 19th century social purity movement against prostitution in Britain. Walkowitz describes the initial radical

impulse behind calls to repeal state regulation of prostitution. Women who protested against the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act understood that prostitution resulted from women's oppressed social and economic position. Later, conservative elements condemned prostitution outright as immoral and called on men "to protect their women and to repress brothels and streetwalkers."

The effects of this retrograde position became dramatically apparent in the autumn of 1888 when public attention in London was riveted on the macabre "Jack the Ripper" murders of prostitutes. Male patrols and vigilance committees, ostensibly organized to shield women from falling prey to "the Ripper," rapidly became a mechanism for intimidating women on the street and increasing female dependence on men.

"Although some feminists still maintained a national presence in the purity crusade, all in all, by the late 1880's feminists had lost considerable authority in the public discussion over sex to a coalition of male professional experts, conservative churchmen and social purity advocates ... Begun as a libertarian struggle against the state sanction of male vice, the repeal campaign helped to spawn a hydra-headed assault on non-marital, non-reproductive sexuality. The struggle against state regulation evolved into a movement that used the instrument of the state for repressive purposes."

Two additional articles in *Powers of Desire* which deal with the prejudices of middle-class reformers toward the sexuality of working-class women are "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920" by Kathy Peiss, and "Feminism, Sexual Morality, and Popular Movements in Turn-of-the Century America" by Barbara Epstein.

For a more detailed analysis of the anthology, see Wendy McKenna's "The Construction of Desire," *The Women's Review of Books* Vol. 1, No. 6 (March 1984; Marilyn Coffey, "Sexual Freedom vs. Feminism," *New Women's Times Feminist Review*, July/Aug 1984.

Notes

- [1.](#) Ruby Rich, "Anti-Porn: Soft Issue, Hard World," *Village Voice*, July 20, 1982.
- [2.](#) Letter published in the July 18, 1982, issue of *Village Voice*.
- [3.](#) Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, "A Report on the Sex Crisis," *Ms. Magazine*, March 1982, P. 64.
- [4.](#) Various anti-pornography groups were founded during this period, such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) in Los Angeles, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media

(WAVPAM) in San Francisco, and Women Against Pornography (WAP) in New York.

5. As the authors write, this attempt originally had a liberating impulse, but soon became restrictive on what constituted a feminist sexuality:

"... at the extreme, feminists attributed to female sexuality an ethereal, disembodied quality that the most straitlaced Victorian would have approved." *Ms.*, March 1982, p. 87.

6. Radical feminists are to be credited for initiating discussion in the women's movement analyzing violence against women as an important aspect of women's oppression. Yet their explanations for the social causes of this violence are flawed in several important respects. Most notably, the radical feminist analysis often assumes an ahistorical and supra-class perspective, depicting the nature of male/female relations as essentially immutable. For a detailed dissection of the various ideological tenets of the women's movement, see (*Feminist Politics and Human Nature* by Alison Jagger (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).

7. "Anti-Porn: Soft Issue, Hard World," *Village Voice*, July 20, 1982.

8. For a fairly recent discussion of the radical feminist position, especially as it relates to attempts to utilize the existing legal system to repress pornography, see "Interview with Catherine MacKinnon in Defining Pornography," *off our backs*, June 1984. MacKinnon explains the theoretical basis for the MacKinnon/Dworkin Ordinance passed on December 30, 1983, by the Minneapolis City Council. The ordinance, which includes pornography as a form of discrimination in the Minneapolis civil rights code, was vetoed by Minneapolis Mayor Donald Frazer. In response, the City Council has established a committee to investigate the issue. (On May 1, 1984, an ordinance of a similar nature was passed in Indianapolis. The ACLU, among other groups, filed a lawsuit in federal court, claiming the ordinance is unconstitutional.) For additional information on the MacKinnon-Dworkin Ordinance, see *New Directions for Women*, May/ June 1984. A copy of the proposed law is obtainable from Women Against Pornography, 358 West 47th Street, New York, NY 10036. See *Gay Community News*, May 19, 1984, p. 1, for a discussion of the harassment of gay bookstores following the enactment of the Indianapolis law.

9. Susan Schechter, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

10. Donnerstein has conducted experiments on "normal" men, which indicate that continuous/ repeated exposure to violent pornography results in a desensitization to the degradation of women.

11. The criticism that the pornography movement assumes a determinist approach toward male behavior, is underscored by Susan Barrowclough

in "NOT A LOVE STORY," published in the November 1982 issue of *Screen Magazine* (England). Barrowdough writes,

"The pornographer does not necessarily give the viewer what he wants: hence the ceaseless proliferation of pornographies and the competitive search by the consumer for images which approximate to his private fantasy and stimulate it. The customer may find what he wants, but he may not. The question remains: how much does the viewer therefore own and retain his fantasies when confronted by these images? How much do they correspond to his own or differ from them? Do they confirm, change, question or bleach out his own private dream-world? To assume his fantasies are completely colonised is to assume that *all* spectators, not just porn viewers, are wholly susceptible to *any* representation."

[12.](#) See, for example, "Feminism and KLUTE" by Christine Gledhill, published in *Women in Film Noir*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan, London: BFI 1978; Diane Giddis, "The Divided Woman: Bree Daniels in KLUTE," *Women and the Cinema*, edited by Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977); and "How Do You Get Pleasure? Another Look at KLUTE" by Terry Lovell and Simon Frith, *Screen Education*, No. 39 (Sumer, 1981, UK). This latter review is of interest for how it examines the construction in KLUTE of a certain type of romantic male hero. Klute played by Donald Sutherland is compared to Darcy in Jane Austin's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The authors write,

"Klute's attraction for Bree, like Darcy's for Elizabeth (and both heroines fight against this attraction, begin their relationships prejudiced) is that his social power (as a man, a law giver, a protector) is at her command ... Elizabeth's power over Darcy depends on her ability to please, and part of the comedy of *Pride and Prejudice* comes from the fact that she makes no effort to do so but, rather, always tries to provoke. But the lesson learned by girls like Elizabeth was that their lot was to please; they had to become the object of another's desire before they could be the subjects of their own. The same message, dressed up in psychological terms, comes across in KLUTE: woman's problem is to find the right sort of man to do the right sort of desiring. This lesson and the typical strategies adopted by women around their sexuality are obviously related to their lack of alternative sources of power: women's sexuality is an economic and a political resource." (p. 18)

[13.](#) Charlotte Brunsdon, "A Subject for the Seventies," *Screen Magazine*, Vol. 23, No. 3-4 (September-October 1982, UK)

[14.](#) Ibid.

[15.](#) Ibid. See also, Julia Lesage, "The Hegemonic Female Fantasy in AN UNMARRIED WOMAN and CRAIG'S WIFE," *Film Reader*, No. 5

(1982).

[16.](#) While Ehrenreich has made an important contribution by analyzing the impact of the *Playboy* philosophy on contemporary women's lives, *The Hearts of Men* also asserts the questionable thesis that the nuclear family is essential to women but not to men. As evidence, Ehrenreich points to the reduction in recent years of hours involved in household production by women and the "feminization of poverty" — the increasing impoverishment of single female heads of households. Ehrenreich concludes that single men, unfettered by family responsibilities, can purchase those services provided by women within the traditional marriage arrangement. By so reducing the role of women as wives and mothers to a pure cash transaction, Ehrenreich is actually calling into question basic premises of the women's movement concerning the role of patriarchal institutions in maintaining the oppression of women.

[17.](#) For an analysis of how the studies of sexologists have been used to control female sexuality in earlier historical periods, see *Surpassing the Love of Men* by Lillian Faderman (especially Chapter 2, under the section, "The Reaction: The Contribution of the Sexologists," p. 239) (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981)

See also Margaret Jackson's "Sexual Liberation or Social Control: Some Aspects of the Relationship Between Feminism and the Social Construction of Sexual Knowledge in the Early Twentieth Century," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (UK), p. 1.

[18.](#) Jill McGreal addresses the issue of censorship in "NOT A LOVE STORY: Feminism and Pornography." *Undercut* (U.K.), no. 6.

"The specific contradiction, then, that manifests itself when the issue of pornography arises, is that the changes in the law that were welcomed by feminists a decade ago have been the very instruments through which pornography has exploded onto the screens and streets of our cities."

In her review, Ruby Rich observes,

"It has been an unsettling evolution, this switch from a movement of self-determination, that trashed billboards and attacked the legitimacy of soft-core advertising, to a movement of social determination that urges legal restrictions and social hygiene ... When the anti-pornography movement traded in its guerilla actions for the more recent route of petitioning a higher authority to enact moral codes, the political trajectory went haywire."

Ironically, NOT A LOVE STORY itself is banned in the province of Ontario where strict moral codes on film are presently in force. Thus the critical context in which the film is received is quite different from the United States.

[19](#). Ibid, p. 4. Since that article and as a response to internal criticism by the women's unit, the National Film Board of Canada has removed that still from circulation in advertising. However, it was the still most widely used when the film opened.

[20](#). These lines from CHICKEN RANCH, as well as others to follow, are from a detailed description of the film published in the August 1983 *Facets Features*, a guide to Facets Multimedia film theater located in Chicago.

I wish to thank Mimi White, Sandra Bartky, Marilyn Carlander and Julia Lesage for criticisms and suggestions.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Bonnie Klein "The first major discussion of pornography on film"

by Lisa DiCaprio

from *Jump Cut*, no. 30, March 1985, pp. 42-43

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The following interview with Bonnie Klein originally appeared in the December 1982 issue of the *Haymarket* newspaper, and was later republished in *The Guardian*. It was conducted soon after NOT A LOVE STORY opened in Chicago in 1982.

Bonnie Klein is the director of NOT A LOVE STORY produced by Studio D of the Canadian Film Board's English Production Branch. The Studio was founded in 1974 to provide a forum for women filmmakers and their concerns. Its main objective is to bring a women's perspective to social issues and to act as a catalyst for social change through the medium of film. Over 50 films have been produced by Studio D in the past eight years.

DiCAPRIO: What was the main goal of Studio D in producing NOT A LOVE STORY?

KLEIN: Our film was the first stab at the broad question of pornography. Our point was to show that pornography is not about sex or eroticism, but its opposite. It represents an anti-sexual attitude. As we see it, pornography and rape are opposite sides of the same coin. Pornography is not about sexuality, but about power relations between men and women. It is the matured child of sexual repression. NOT A LOVE STORY represents the first major discussion of pornography on film.

DiCAPRIO: What specific impact has the film had politically?

KLEIN: At the time it was being made, a governmental inquiry was being carried out in Quebec with a view towards changing the provincial law to permit the showing of films classified as "hard-core" and portraying "excessive violence." This was to be the new "Cinema X."

Opposition inspired by the film succeeded in defeating the proposed legislation. The film was also shown by the Minister responsible for the status of women to Parliament's Standing Committee on Social Affairs as part of a report on family violence. In a more general sense, the main impact of NOT A LOVE STORY has been to place the issue of pornography in the mainstream of politics, beyond the confines of the women's movement.

DiCAPRIO: What is your opinion on the question of censorship?

KLEIN: I personally believe that direct action should be utilized and is preferable to censorship. However, there are some forms of censorship that should be considered, such as drawing a parallel between pornography and hate literature, as well as nuisance laws. The problem with censorship is that it only deals with the symptom, not the root cause of pornography.

DiCAPRIO: In the film, research psychologist Dr. Ed Donnerstein concludes that of the top ten variables which can increase aggressive behavior among men, eight of them are present in aggressive pornography. Could you elaborate on this connection between pornography and violence against women?

KLEIN: Until fairly recently, the research on this issue has been fairly biased. Increasingly, however, a causal relationship is being established between violent pornography and aggressive behavior among men towards women. The findings of Donnerstein as well as Neil Malamuth of the University of Manitoba in Canada are long and complicated. We could have chosen to discuss their work in much more detail, but our basic choice was to use the film as a medium to deal with feelings and imagery associated with pornography. In some sense, I see the question of scientific proof as a diversion since such proof can never be established definitively. Most women do not have the problem of requiring scientific evidence to make the connection between male aggression and violent pornography.

DiCAPRIO: In her review published in the *Village Voice*, film critic Ruby Rich referred to NOT A LOVE STORY as a "religious parable." How do you deal with the criticism that former stripper Linda Lee Tracey is portrayed as having made a superficial conversion against pornography?

KLEIN: I think that such a criticism is extremely condescending to Linda. She actually continued to work as a stripper for six months after the film was completed to be sure of her decision to quit. She finally realized that she had been lying to herself. Linda started to hate her work and to lose her sense of humor about it. She actually became physically ill from it.

As portrayed in the film, Linda originally began to question her work after going to a Women Against Pornography march. She was already asking questions when we met her. From Linda, I have learned what the inside of the pornography industry is like. Originally, Linda thought of

her work as a celebration of sexuality but she gradually came to see it as actually based on hate and fear of women.

DiCAPRIO: Another criticism of NOT A LOVE STORY is that it focuses too narrowly on pornography and does not adequately deal with the objectification of women in advertising.

KLEIN: There already is some general consciousness about the sexism in ads. The connection between the exploitation of women in pornography and in advertising is invariably made by those who see the film. What we wanted to show in the film is that violent pornography is no longer a small fringe, but is now the bulk of the market. The harder images have taken over and this is terribly frightening. We felt compelled to portray this reality.

DiCAPRIO: How do you define pornography?

KLEIN: The best definition of pornography is provided by the Greek root of the word, which is "portrayal of female sexual servants." This is in marked contrast to the root of eroticism or eros — sexual love."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jorge Sanjinés and Tomás Gutierrez Alea Class, film language and popular cinema

by William Alexander

from *Jump Cut*, no. 30, March 1985, pp. 45-48

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As intellectuals in capitalist societies, we come mainly from the bosom of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie, Jorge Sanjinés wrote in 1978,

"And we must always watch out for the enemy who has to a greater or lesser degree infiltrated our minds. That is, we must watch out for him if we don't wish to serve him even while we are attempting to destroy him ... And nothing is more difficult than to know exactly where in our thought or behavior his footprints or noxious gaze is present."[\[1\]](#)

And as Cuba's Tomás Gutierrez Alea reported in 1973:

"Almost all of our intellectuals are of bourgeois background. They have a total adhesion to the Revolution, so the problem isn't only to change structures: you also have to change those men, and you only do that through struggle."[\[2\]](#)

Fernando Solanas, the Argentine filmmaker, elaborates:

"One isn't able to change one's form of expression or one's ideology the way he changes his shirt. The fact that a whole people can move from illiteracy to literacy is already a giant step forward. But the transformation of man into a new man is more complex and is going to take longer ... The problem is that all the subjectivity, all the vital experience of a man who grew up in a capitalist context is alienated. Consequently, his psychology and his language are alienated as well."[\[3\]](#)

As these and other Latin American filmmakers understand it, Latin American intellectuals have a colonized mentality. Their background, education, culture, and economic status are bound to the dominant

ideology and characteristics of western capitalism. That is, they are bound to individualism in all of its ramifications, to consumerism, to international economic arrangements which serve their interests as members of a small elite, to indifference to native culture and traditions, and to willed ignorance of the suffering of others. Decolonization, then, becomes an essential psychological and political process for those intellectuals and artists who wish to participate in the revolution or in revolutionary movements. It means eliminating such ideology and characteristics and aligning oneself with national progressive forces and political activity.

Making films as weapons in the revolutionary struggle represents such an activity for the decolonized filmmaker, who in doing so often risks exile or death. But while "decolonization of the filmmaker and of films" will come simultaneously,[\[4\]](#) as Solanas and fellow filmmaker Octavio Getino put it, it will not come quickly or easily. The Ukamau Film Group in Bolivia, Sanjinés recalls,

"had to learn slowly what was the responsibility of the artist and intellectual who owed, in good part, their own privileged condition to the waste, hunger, and extermination of the majorities of the population."[\[5\]](#)

The Latin American filmmakers who accept this responsibility have two possible audiences: the middle and upper classes from which they themselves originate, the principal consumers of film entertainment; and the workers and peasants who make up the vast majority of most Latin American countries. The first audience is largely urban, accustomed to foreign culture, and upwardly mobile within the local elite power structure. The second audience is more difficult to reach. It often has a firmer grasp of native culture and tradition and thus is more resistant to normal film fare and other colonizing culture. And it also has a key stake in social, economic, and political change. Both audiences are composed of spectators, and in the "continent of hunger"[\[6\]](#) spectators are "cowards and traitors."[\[7\]](#) Therefore with both audiences, the filmmaker's purpose is not to create "understanding spectators," in Miguel Littin's phrase,[\[8\]](#) liberals who despite themselves are collaborators with the enemy, but to transform spectators into actors, or participants in the revolution. In order to bring about this transformation, filmmakers seek an original and an empowering use of language.

First they must analyze the two predominant forms of film language, which Solanas and Getino called First and Second Cinema.[\[9\]](#) First Cinema, which dominates Latin American screens through corporate control of distribution and theaters, is Hollywood and Hollywood-derived film. It has high, often slick production values. It presents a completed world where no serious change is necessary. It celebrates individualism, the consumer ethic, and superficial beauty and behavior. And it denigrates minority, third world, and working class people. Second Cinema is New Wave and related film. It has a subjective,

individualistic, "auteur" perspective. It often is less linear than First Cinema, more fragmented, disruptive, and thought-producing. It is more likely to expose social problems. It attracts liberal and progressive intellectuals. But it seldom addresses the politics of change.

The language of both First and Second Cinema undermines any attempt at revolutionary content. A purpose of First Cinema is to pacify thought and subdue the will, while revolutionary art must lead to praxis, to action based upon reflection. And, in Solanas words,

"Auteur cinema is perfectly capable of satisfying the needs and wishes of the consumer-society. Therefore, the author, even if subjectively he is a revolutionary, continues to create works which are objectively bourgeois ... If a left-wing 'author' criticizes the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie still is able to recognize itself in the author, and it exclaims, 'Oh it's so beautiful! This Italian film is so beautiful!' ... While [the filmmaker] turns the ideas around, [he] doesn't change his means of expression, nor his subjectivity, nor his irrationality. He continues to express himself in a style and a worldview that belong to the bourgeois consumer-society. He can easily be co-opted."[\[10\]](#)

Having rejected the language of First and Second Cinema, Latin American filmmakers find numerous resources for a new language, that of Third Cinema. The speech, environment, experience, culture and behavior of workers and peasants themselves become one resource; filmmakers like Sanjinés, Solanas and Getino, Littin in Chile, Marta Rodriguez and Jorge Silva in Colombia, and Federico García in Peru have worked in solidarity with peasant and worker communities to shape films that represent their struggles. A second resource lies in the hidden history of a country — in struggles, massacres, and victories of the past either not recorded or distorted in the schools and in history books. Littin's *PROMISED LAND*, Sanjinés' *COURAGE OF THE PEOPLE*, and Sergio Giral's *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* are but a few of the films that defy traditional history and historical language. And a third resource lies in the aesthetic of imperfection, that is, in the idea of film still in process, reflecting a society still in formation, opposed to the complete, complacent, perfected society and form of dominant cinema. Solanas and Getino's *THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES* ends with an appeal to the audience to add further stories, letters, and ideas to the unfinished film, which is an instrument of the unfinished struggle.

I would like to examine closely two films made in radically different parts of Latin America. Jorge Sanjines' and the Ukamau Group's *THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY* was filmed in Peru in 1973 during the relatively liberal military regime of General Velasco, but nonetheless under pre-revolutionary conditions. In such conditions in most of Latin America, movie theaters are under corporate and governmental control; more or less stern political censorship laws exist; filmmakers receive little if any subsidy; and filmmaking costs are nearly prohibitive. Even in the best of

circumstances there is little or no support for film critical of the status quo.

On the other hand, Tomás Gutierrez Alea directed *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* in 1967 in revolutionary Cuba. There the Cuban Film Institute is subsidized by the government; the role of the filmmaker is to support the ongoing revolution; and Cuban-made films have complete access to all theaters. Cuban filmmakers understand the significance of this difference. Gutierrez Alea finds it "valuable to an extent" that elsewhere in Latin America there is

"militant cinema which aims at the poorest sectors of the country and seeks the kind of response that will spark a *toma de conciencia* about the social and political problems which those people face."

Yet, he says, the "cultural struggle must also be waged and won on the commercial screens." This is impossible, however, in a class society, where

"film can only be another instrument of the dominant class ... the authentically popular film can only develop itself fully in a society where the interests of the state - that is, in a socialist society."[\[11\]](#)

Humberto Solás, another Cuban director, distinguishes filmmaking's functions in the two situations:

"Revolutionary political life in a capitalist country is insurrectionary activity. A revolutionary film would thus be one that is capable of becoming the equivalent of an insurrectionary act ... A true revolutionary film is one that succeeds in raising consciousness, one that advocates insurrection in so far as insurrection is the correct path ... In the socialist world, a revolutionary film [instead] must present the revolution as a permanent fact, an ongoing process which nothing can reverse. It must use the medium to destroy whatever bourgeois concepts persist on either the administrative or the individual level ... the revolutionary must constantly struggle to destroy all that creates untenable contradictions."[\[12\]](#)

Although both in the Andes and in Cuba, First and Second Cinema's language remains problematic and potentially counterrevolutionary, the advantages and goals of Cuban filmmaking permit Gutierrez Alea in *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* to adopt the language of Second Cinema. Under his control, it becomes a language of decolonization, a powerful resource for the revolution.

MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT is stylistically very sophisticated. When the bourgeois anti-hero Sergio and Elena visit the late Ernest Hemingway's house outside Havana, Sergio thinks to

himself,

"They say Hemingway killed animals so as not to kill himself.
But in the end he couldn't resist the temptation."

Towards the end of the film, as Sergio becomes increasingly isolated while his compatriots mobilize during the Cuban missile crisis, he snaps off the head of a precious glass rooster. The viewer may make the connection: suicide stands as a probable option for Sergio. In the pre-credit sequence, a counter-revolutionary assassin shoots someone during a Carnival street dance, then moves quickly away through the crowd. Later in the film, the assassination is shown again, and we briefly catch a glimpse of Sergio moving through the crowd in exactly the same manner and position as the assassin had earlier and, like the assassin, wearing glasses. We also note the subtle parallels between the rape sequence with Elena and the tape recorder sequence with the voice of Sergio's wife, Laura, who left for Florida. We are challenged by the mix of documentary and fiction footage and by the puzzle of who narrates the documentary scenes. We link the camera's roving over the expensive objects in Sergio's apartment with the later camera's scanning Hemingway's possessions. And we appreciate the use of subjective camera and the constant isolation of Sergio in the frame.

Caught up in this sophistication of language, many of us in this country easily agree with Elena's declaration that Sergio is neither revolutionary nor counter-revolutionary, but simply *nada* — nothing. And thus we have a portrait of a sensitive existentialist anti-hero, unattractive, perhaps, and clearly out of step with his time, but someone recognizable, someone we may even half identify with. However — and the susceptible Cuban viewer knows this — Elena is wrong. Sergio is not just nothing. He is, for one thing, a rapist. He knew the effect his clothing, style, and status would have on Elena; and after the trial brought by Elena's family, he confesses to himself that he is not innocent.

He is also a racist. After Elena leaves his apartment following her second visit, he pictures her in comic poses and patronizingly sketches her as a typically underdeveloped Cuban woman, inconsistent and incapable of maturing. The scene shifts, as he talks, to show women, especially Afro-Cuban women, in the streets of Havana. Later, when he refuses to answer Elena's knock at his door, his television screen carries a Cuban Film Institute documentary called NOW, a powerful Santiago Alvarez short on racism in the United States. Sergio also has a class prejudice and despises the "darkened minds" of Elena's working class family.

And he is a sexist. Gazing at women from the walk above a swimming pool, he remarks to himself,

"There is an exquisite moment between thirty and thirty-five when Cuban women suddenly pass from maturity to poverty. They are fruits which rot at an amazing speed."

Immediately we see a Film Institute documentary on Marilyn Monroe, singing, "Baby, I'm through with love," followed by a newsreel showing "the provocations of military personnel and counter-revolutionaries exiled" on the Guantanamo Marine Base. Sergio has a narrow attitude, one which echoes those that helped destroy Marilyn Monroe. His machismo is counter-revolutionary. In contrast, Gutierrez Alea consistently shows the Cuban women Sergio is unable to notice: the powerful freeze frame of the Afro-Cuban female dancer in close-up under the credits, and shots of women militia walking in pairs during the mobilization for the missile crisis.

Finally, in some sense, Sergio is a murderer. If not the assassin himself, he stands as an accomplice or unresponsive witness to a counter-revolutionary assassination. He is not *nada*. He is a dangerous counter-revolutionary.

The Bay of Pigs prisoners sequence provides a philosophical base for my accusation. As we see newsreel scenes depicting *gusano* prisoners and Batista, his police at work, and wealthy Cubans, Sergio reads in voice-over from Leon Rozitchner's *Moral burguesa y revolución*, which he had picked up at a bookstore.^[13] The sequence has an intertitle — THE TRUTH OF THE GROUP IS IN THE MURDERER. Sergio finds that

"in all capitalist societies there is this same type of man at the disposal of the bourgeoisie, who is in charge of such singular duties. In the division of moral work the murderer permits the existence of those who are not directly in contact with death, and as separate individuals want to keep their souls clean."

Among the prisoners is the murderer Calviño, from whom the others erroneously disassociate themselves, failing to "recognize themselves as part of the system which entangles them in their own acts."

"In the accounts of Freyre, the land baron; in the Extreme Unction of Lugo, the priest; in the reasonings of Andreu, the philosopher; in the dismissals and in the book of Rivero, the dilettante; in the "representative democracy" of Varone — who could read clearly the death which through them spread Cuba, death by hunger, by sickness, by torture, by frustration?"

Sergio here, at some level, recognizes his own complicity, both in the pre-revolutionary period and now in 1963 in the U.S.-paid group that spread hunger, sickness, torture, and frustration over Cuba and that would do it again. Although he did not physically murder anyone, his current mode of existence and his indifference to the suffering of others under Batista have permitted murder to take place. He is responsible. His attitudes and behavior continue to perpetuate values inherent in the old system and would facilitate its return.

Sergio needs decolonization. And seemingly so does Edmundo Desnoes,

who wrote the novel upon which the film is based. Seen in *MEMORIES* at a round table on Literature and Underdevelopment, Desnoes correctly brands U.S. treatment of Latin Americans racist, but still an Afro Cuban subordinate carries out minor functions in the background. Jack Gleber, also on that panel, helps us see that the panel members' elite phrases equal disengagement and that the panel's structure itself is undemocratic, perpetuating the panelists' own elite intellectual status. Panelists Desnoes and Gutierrez Alea openly acknowledge their own lingering colonization, their likeness to Sergio, their potential for counter-revolutionary language. As Julianne Burton has pointed out, and as Gutierrez Alea confesses indirectly in an interview, he and Desnoes

"are both 'contaminated' by what Che Guevara metaphorically termed 'original sin.' Their sympathetic, multi-dimensional portrayal of Sergio, as they collaborate to bring him to life on the screen, grows out of their personal experience and is itself an expression of their own attempt to overcome the syndrome to which Sergio succumbs in the end."[\[14\]](#)

Yet Gutierrez Alea's appearance in the film, as a filmmaker acquaintance of Sergio, seems less compromised than that of Desnoes. Although friendly to Sergio, he screens for Sergio First and Second Cinema clips censored under Batista, clips which repeated over and over reflect Sergio's fixation on women as objects of sexual prey.

Gutierrez Alea, then, disassociates himself from the colonized behavior of Sergio and does so by using Sergio's own language. This is my key point. Gutierrez Alea has chosen to work within his own language structure — that of the middle-class intellectual — for he seeks an audience of such intellectuals, especially those who remain dangerous spectators of the Cuban Revolution. He hooks them with Second Cinema, a subtle film language that appeals to their sophistication, and through it enables them to see themselves for what they are. Here then is one use of film language for empowerment, for changing some spectators into actors in the revolution, and for further isolating those who will not change. By his own process of decolonization, by becoming hyper-aware and hyper-critical of his own class-based language, Gutierrez Alea can use that language to undermine others who still use it to perpetuate their privilege.

This language use would affect relatively few in pre-revolutionary countries, for where one is rewarded for maintaining privilege, such films will seldom catch the conscience. Although *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* has provoked useful discussions among alert and conscientious viewers, it remains true that by far the majority of the audience, as Solanas suggests, will celebrate the film for its beauty and sophistication. They will argue brilliantly over its meaning. And they will settle upon Sergio as an existential anti-hero. The film may well have functioned differently abroad than in Cuba. According to Gutierrez Alea,

"Many people went to see MEMORIES more than once, and some returned as many as four or five times. That does not happen with many movies. It makes me think that the film hit its mark, which was, first and foremost, to communicate with the Cuban public, not with audiences from other countries. It achieved its goal in the sense that it disturbed and unsettled its audience; it forced people to think."[\[15\]](#)

If the audience in other countries merely admire MEMORIES for its cinematic brilliance, such film language may play into the hands of the status quo, as Sanjinés also points out.[\[16\]](#) And it is to Sanjinés that we now turn to see another use of film language for empowerment.

Their eyes and ears were struck, in Sanjinés' words, by the sights and sounds of misery that demanded a response. Nonetheless, the Ukamau group "had to learn slowly what the responsibility of the artist and intellectual was."[\[17\]](#) Their first films showed the misery of Bolivian peasants, miners, and urban slum dwellers. Quickly enough, however, the group realized that at best these films reminded the middle class attending city theaters that malnourished and mistreated people existed in the same city, in the mines, and in rural communities. Projections in the mines and slums taught the filmmakers that the people themselves knew their misery better than the filmmakers and did not need such films. What the people wanted instead was to know the causes of their poverty, the system of exploitation behind it, their enemies' names, and the means to combat those enemies.[\[18\]](#) Having committed themselves to making films for the oppressed majority of the country, Ukamau took the lesson to heart.

BLOOD OF THE CONDOR, a fictionalized expose of the Peace Corps' sterilization of peasant women in Bolivia, was their next step. It indicted the principal enemy, United States, for imperialism. Although the film beautifully respected Indian peasant culture, and although it helped effect ejection of the Peace Corps from Bolivia, the relation of film and filmmakers to the peasants remained, Sanjinés says, vertical. Screenings in peasant communities taught the filmmakers that the narrative method of parallel stories, including one told through a series of flashbacks, was incompatible with native narrative tradition. So too was a plot built around individual protagonists and traditional suspense. The problem did not entail the peasants' ability to comprehend. It reflected a failure on the artists' part to find a film language corresponding to the internal rhythms of the people and to their conception of reality. The aesthetic issues reflected a problem of decolonization.[\[19\]](#)

By ROADS OF DEATH (a film destroyed by accident or sabotage in a German lab), the Ukamau group had turned away from using an individual protagonist to a collective one, for the native Bolivian Quechua and Aymara cultures are collective. The filmmakers went even further in THE COURAGE OF THE PEOPLE, entering into a complete collaboration with the people of Siglo Veinte to reenact the government's slaughter of miners there on the night of San Juan in July,

1967. For the first time with this film, the Group

"served as instruments of the people, who expressed themselves through us after we had become assimilated to their tale and way of telling it."[\[20\]](#)

Yet film language problems remained. Shot composition and editing still corresponded to certain pictorial concepts of western art and were still over-conditioned by the filmmakers' alien perspective. The suspense remained too closely tied to western narrative.[\[21\]](#)

By the time of making THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY, Sanjinés and those members of Ukamau who entered exile with him in 1971 had fully developed a theory of revolutionary film. Revolutionary film meant film united with, made with, the people — *cine junto al pueblo*. It was not film from outside, but film from inside, made in full collaboration with the protagonists, who gave to it their voices, their culture, the rhythms of their lives, and their ideas. This meant an interactive relation. The films would modify the people, and the people by participating and criticizing would modify the film in return.

Totally rejecting First and Second Cinema language, revolutionary film here deserted the compromised middle class audience for an audience of workers and peasants. Its aims were to illuminate imperialism's economic machinations, to resist imperialism's cultural infiltration, and to empower the spectators by making films in their own language and according to their own conceptions. In opposition to the emotional manipulation of First Cinema, revolutionary film would provoke reflection, yet in order to be effective it would insist on both beauty and emotion. In its Andean incarnation, it rejected individual for collective protagonists. It embraced Indian culture as a key dialectical element in its form and content and in the revolutionary struggle.[\[22\]](#)

THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY opens with the camera moving over the ruins of Macchu Pichu, holding on an old man as he begins the narration, then moving over the ruins again as we hear his voice over:

"Brothers, peasants, our ancestors built this town, its magnificent temples and houses. They were clever and knew how to handle things. We their descendants must appreciate their work and not forget them. Envy, theft, and idleness didn't exist then. They were a rich people who ate well and had warm clothes. There were houses for everyone, even in bad times. We must know their history, our history, well. We must know who destroyed the way of life and culture of our ancestors. Exploiters, greedy people looking for gold, robbed our ancestors and made them work themselves to death. This lust for power still exists. The brutal exploiters still are here. We'll throw them out."

"We have spoken about the monuments and the past. Now we'll talk about the present. In Tinkuy something very bad

happened. Julian Huamantica was killed by the landlord and his head cut off. It is a true story. Brothers, listen." [23]

Not only does the narrator identify and indict the enemy in the beginning, but he tells us, as he will do throughout, what is going to happen. He is a *cuentista*, a storyteller in the Quechua-Aymara tradition; the *cuentista* offers a happy solution to Ukamau's problem with narration. In this tradition, suspense over what will happen gives way to interest in how it happens. Our narrator is also a community elder: he speaks with wisdom and makes judgments about the events that take place. His voice, a voice of the community, controls much of the film.

A dialectical relationship between the outsider *guerrilleros* and the community results in a solidarity in which both learn from each other and resolve to join forces. Native culture becomes a key force in all decisions. Approached by the *guerrilleros* and asked to commit the community to the struggle against not only the local landlords but also the North Americans who keep them in power, the peasant Gerardo replies,

"I trust you because you are honest. But I must consult with the community."

And a community dialogue between *guerrilleros* and peasants follows. Two other sequences are linked by a repeated distant camera position altered by a zoom to a medium shot. The first sequence follows a sequence in which the *guerrilleros* give medical assistance to the peasants. As the camera moves in, we see a group of *guerrilleros* and peasants listening to the *queña*-playing of a *guerrillero* and then of a peasant boy. This leads into several scenes in which the two groups share a ritual, drink, and work together, a series that the narrator concludes, as the camera zooms in on him, by declaring that the *guerrilleros* are indeed good people. In the second sequence we move from distant to medium shot on the trial of the landlord, another collaboration between the outsiders and the community that respects collective decision-making.

For the first time, in this film Sanjinés rejected the close up and adhered to the long take. Although technical limitations necessitated more cuts than he wished, [24] generally he kept the camera running and at a middle distance. His aesthetic goal was that the community would be seen acting collectively, so that individuals would not be emphasized, and so that the spectator would not be manipulated by the filmmaker and could reflect upon the scene. Only when the collective's interest focused on an individual would the camera move in on him or her. When Jacinta returns to the community with her murdered husband Julian's head, the camera holds at a distance from her, circles and backs further off as peasants come up and cluster around her, then finally moves in, held above the heads of the crowd as they decide to storm the landlord's hacienda.

THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY was filmed in a Peruvian community that had experienced a similar incident; it was shaped by the memories and instincts of the participating peasants. In Humberto Solás's terms, it advocates insurrection when insurrection is appropriate. It is also somewhat open-ended, reflecting the imperfect and incomplete nature of the struggle. The narrator points to mistakes by the *guerrilleros*, who leave the community exposed to reprisal, and invites further comment on the strategy they have adopted.

Less directly than in MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT, we have self-analysis in this film as well. The Ukamau group, like the *guerrilleros*, enters a community and works with the community to improve conditions and carry the struggle into a new phase. They are outsiders who know and respect the traditions and lives of community members and wish to learn from them. And they also risk exposing the community to the authorities by their presence. The pluses and minuses of the guerrilla presence in Tinkuy probably reflects Ukamau's exploration of its own ambivalence over its method.

Whereas Gutierrez Alea in MEMORIES utilizes the language of the colonized to undermine colonized mentality, he does so in a society where the rewards go to those who join the revolution.^[25] In contrast, Sanjinés offers a second road, a road more appropriate to the pre-revolutionary conditions of Bolivia, a road that goes to the people to empower them by adapting their language to the powerful language of film. He carries his decolonization to the point of a kind of class suicide, becoming as a filmmaker an instrument of expression for the peasant and worker. It was not easy, as Sanjinés notes:

"It is hard to transform certain conceptions of art which bourgeois ideology has imposed on one, especially if one is formed within the parameters of western culture."

But if one changes "relations of creation," it can "lead to a change of content and of form." It means trust, analysis, and a willingness to let go:

"... it is a process that reaches its purification through contact with the people, in the integration of the people into the creative phenomenon, in the clarification of the purposes of popular art, and in the abandonment of individualist positions."^[26]

In Cuba, people returned time and again to sort out their relation to MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT. In the Andean countries, prints of Ukamau films constantly circulate through worker and peasant sectors and stimulate intense analysis. Both filmmakers have used film language originally as a form of power to undermine the language and politics of the dominant forces and to provoke the spectators into revolutionary praxis.

Notes

1. Jorge Sanjinés, "Sobre un cine contra el pueblo y por un cine junto al pueblo," *Teoría y práctica de un cine junto al pueblo* (Mexico: Cerro del Agua, 1979), p. 76.
2. Tomás Gutierrez Alea, "Presentación y autocrítica en forma de diálogo con Tomás Gutierrez Alea y Raymundo Gleyser," *Hablemos de cine* (Lima), No. 68 (1976), p. 21. The quotation is my translation, as are all quotations from Spanish sources in this paper. This one I translated from some notes, then discovered when I went to the source that I had skipped a lot of words in my notes; I haven't had time to revise, but the gist is accurate, as is the translating of it.
3. Fernando Solanas, "Fernando Solanas: An Interview," *Film Quarterly*, Fall, 1970, p. 41.
4. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema," *Cineaste*, 4, No. 3 (Winter 1970-71), 10.
5. Jorge Sanjinés, "La experiencia boliviana," *Teoría y práctica*, p. 14.
6. Jorge Sanjinés, "Elements para una teoría y práctica del cine revolucionario," *Teoría y práctica*, p. 46.
7. The phrase comes from Frantz Fanon; it is used by Solanas and Getino in their film THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES.
8. Miguel Littin, "Film in Chile: an interview with Miguel Littin," *Cineaste*, 4, No. 4 (Spring 1971), p. 5.
9. See "Toward a Third Cinema," *op. cit.*
10. Solanas, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
11. Tomás Gutierrez Alea, "'Individual Fulfillment and Collective Achievement': An Interview with Tomás Gutierrez Alea," *Cineaste*, 8, No. 1, p-13, and "Dialéctica del espectador," p. 17.
12. Humberto Solás, "An Interview with Humberto Solás: 'Every Point of Arrival Is a Point of Departure,'" *JUMP CUT*, No. 19 (1978), p. 31.
13. Julianne Burton identifies the title in her excellent discussion of the film, MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT in the Land of Overdevelopment," *Cineaste*, 8, No. 1, p. 19.
14. *Ibid*, p. 17. At the moment I'm not sure where the Gutierrez Alea indirect confession is.
15. Tomás Gutierrez Alea, "Individual Fulfillment ...," p. 8.
16. Sanjinés, "Sobre un cine ...," p. 77.
17. Sanjinés, "La experiencia boliviana," p. 14.

[18.](#) *Ibid*, p. 17.

[19.](#) Sanjinés, "Elementos para una teoría y práctica del cine revolucionario," *Teoría y práctica*, p. 62, and *Sobre FUERA DE AQUI*, "Cine Boliviano del realizador al crítico," ed. C. Mesa, *et al* (La Paz: Editorial Gisbert, 1979), p. 159.

[20.](#) Sanjinés, *Cine Boliviano*, p. 162-63.

[21.](#) Sanjinés, *Cine Boliviano*, p. 163.

[22.](#) Material taken from throughout *Teoría y práctica*. See especially pp. 57-8, 78-80, 98.

[23.](#) This is a rough transcription of rough notes from the film. [Editor's note: Sanjinés used as his film's narrator a real life, indigenous, peasant-union organizer, Saturnino Quilca, who was featured in a 35mm documentary directed by Peruvian director Nora Izcue. Her film, including the negatives, was confiscated by the Peruvian government and has not been shown there. A print had already gone to the Leipzig film festival and is archived in the DDR. Sanjinés met Quilca through Nora Izcue. Given the narrator Quilca's organizing experience in real life, THE PRINCIPAL ENEMY's reduction of him to a *cuentista* without mention of that experience, in fact, heightens the importance of the *guerrillero*-outsiders in the film both narrationally and politically.]

[24.](#) Sanjinés, "Elementos para una teoria ...," p. 64.

[25.](#) In the film he is now making [released at HASTA CIERTO PUNTO], Gutierrez Alea appears to be exploring the limitations of his position. He will portray a filmmaker, a revolutionary intellectual, who wishes to get close to and express working class life. The protagonist has his crew videotape interviews in the wharves of Havana in order to help him understand their reality better and give him the basis for a script. However it turns out that he and his scriptwriter disagree. The latter wishes to penetrate the reality more fully, while the director wishes to use the videotaped reality to make his fictional film. As a result the film is not completed. "Itself mixing fiction and documentary, my film represents a confrontation between the differing class histories, language, and visions of the revolutionary intellectual and the revolutionary worker," said Tomás Gutierrez Alea, speaking at the Third World Cinema Conference, April 28, 1983, New York City.

[26.](#) Sanjinés, *ibid*, pp. 60-61.

The Viewer's Dialectic, part 2

by Tomás Gutierrez Alea

translated by Julia Lesage

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We are pleased to present here the second part of Tomás Gutierrez Alea's essay, "The Viewer's Dialectic." The first part appeared in JUMP CUT No. 29 (which you can obtain by sending \$2.00 (US\$2.50 abroad) to P.O. Box 865, Berkeley, CA, 94701. The final part of "The Viewer's Dialectic," in which Gutierrez Alea carefully analyzes his own film, *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT*, will appear in JUMP CUT, No. 32. The complete translation is also available from the Center for Cuban Studies, New York.

THE CONTEMPLATIVE AND THE ACTIVE SPECTATOR

Spectacle is essentially a phenomenon destined for contemplation.

People, reduced momentarily to the condition of spectators, contemplate a peculiar phenomenon, the characteristic traits of which indicate the unusual, the extraordinary, the exceptional, the beyond the ordinary.

Certain real phenomena — natural or social phenomena — can indeed manifest themselves spectacularly: wars, mass demonstrations, natural forces unleashed, grandiose landscapes. They constitute a spectacle insofar as they break down the habitual image we have of reality. They offer an unfamiliar image, a magnified and revealing one, to the people contemplating them — the spectators. And just as reality can manifest itself spectacularly, so too real spectacle, the kind people provide for themselves in play or in artistic expression, can be more or less spectacular in the degree to which it distances itself from or draws closer to daily reality. But in any case, spectacle exists *as such* in the function of the spectator. By definition spectators are people who contemplate and whose condition is determined not just by the characteristics of the phenomenon they are looking at, but rather by the position that they as individuals (subjects) occupy in relation to it. People can be actors or spectators facing the same phenomenon.

What does it mean to call the spectator a passive being? In a general sense, not only all knowledge, but also the entire complex of interests and values that comprise consciousness, are shaped and developed, both socio-historically and individually. This follows a process that has as its point of departure the moment of looking (sensory consciousness). It culminates in the moment of rational or theoretical consciousness. We can say, therefore, that the condition of being a spectator is a fundamental one. It's a moment in the process of the subject's appropriating or interiorizing reality — a reality that includes, of course, the cultural sphere as a product of specific human activity.

But clearly contemplation itself doesn't consist of a simple, passive appropriation by the individual. It responds to people's needs to improve the conditions of their lives. It already bears within it a certain activity. There can be more or less activity, which does not just depend on subjects and their social and historical locus. It also depends on the peculiarities of the contemplated object. What I wish to investigate is how such specific features can constitute a stimulus for unleashing in viewers activity of another order, a resulting action that surpasses the spectacle.

When I refer to "contemplative" spectators, I mean ones who don't move beyond the passive-contemplative level. Correspondingly, "active" spectators, taking the moment of lived contemplation as their point of departure, generate a process of critically understanding reality (including, of course, the spectacle), and thus they generate a practical, transforming action.

Viewers looking at a spectacle are faced with the product of a creative process that produced a fictional image. That product also began with objective reality. Thus, a spectacle can be directly contemplated as an object in and of itself, as a product of practical human activity. But viewers can also refer to the content, which is more or less objective, which the spectacle reflects. Then the spectacle functions as a mediation in the process of understanding reality.

When a relation is produced only at the first level, that is, when spectacle is contemplated merely as an object in and of itself and nothing more, "contemplative" spectators can satisfy their need for enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure. But they express that activity fundamentally in accepting or rejecting the spectacle; they do not go beyond the cultural plane. Here, the cultural plane is offered to people as a simple object of consumption. Any reference to the social reality that shapes culture is reduced to an affirmation of cultural values or, in a few cases, to a complacent "critique."

In capitalist society, the typical consumerist film spectacle is the light comedy or melodrama. It has invariably had "a happy end." This has provided, and to a certain degree continues to provide, a rather efficient ideological weapon to promote and consolidate conformity among huge sectors of the public. First, there's a plot. In its numerous situations, we

are made to feel that the stable values of society are threatened, via the persona of the hero who incarnates those values, and which, on an ideological plane, conform to the character's appearance. That is to say, those are the values which (people almost never understand why this happens) have been converted into sacred ideas and objects of worship and veneration. These include fatherland as an abstract notion, private property, religion, and generally all that constitutes bourgeois morality. In the end those values are saved. We leave the viewing room with the sensation that everything's ok, that we don't need to change anything. One veil after another has been drawn over reality. That means people can't be happy but have to convert something that could be a diverting game and healthy entertainment into an effort to evade things. Such a process throws individual, trapped viewers into a net of relations that will keep them from self-knowledge and full self-development.

If spectacle is used as a refuge when people are faced with a hostile reality, then it can only collaborate with all the factors that maintain that reality. The spectacle acts as a pacifier, an escape valve. It shapes contemplative viewers as they face reality. The mechanism is so obvious and transparent, it's been denounced with tenacious frequency.[\[5\]](#) [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Critics have proposed many ways out of this immensely irritating situation, which inverts viewers' role as subjects and converts them into the sad state of being objects.

The *happy end* was discredited within a reality whose mere appearance disproved the rose-colored image sold to people. So artists had to acquire other more sophisticated mechanisms. The most spectacular tactic, surely, was the "happening." Such an art form takes the spectator into the play at a level that is presumably corrosive for an alienating and repressive society. Not only does the happening propose to give spectators an opportunity to participate, but it even drags them in against their will and involves them in "provocative" and "subversive" actions. But all this goes on, of course, clearly *within* the spectacle. There anything can happen and many things (even women, in the extreme cases) can be damaged. What dominates is the unusual, the unexpected, surprise, and exhibitionism. Beyond all that, we could find a valuable ritual that helped shape people to behave in a determined way. Generally, it'd be very entertaining, above all for those who would abandon themselves to the luxury of looking at things as if from above because undoubtedly that'd give them a certain kind of relief. In spite of the happening's truculent and disquieting appearance, it might just be an ingenious expedient. In the final instance, it helps to prolong the situation, not to change anything. It's like going hunting while those below are getting together collectively.

The film spectacle, of course, has no room for this kind of resource, which would facilitate or provoke people's "participation" on the basis of complete rupture. Nevertheless, the problem of spectators' participation still persists. It demands a solution that's within — or better, based on — the cinematic spectacle itself. Looking at this problem, we can see clearly the simplistic focus that too often was used to treat it. First of all,

our uneasiness about the spectators' position reveals something we frequently forgot but which nevertheless may be an axiomatic truth: *the answer which interests viewers is not just that which they get from inside the spectacle, but rather that which they ought to get from confronting reality*. That is to say, people are fundamentally interested in real participation, not an illusory one.

During periods of relative calm in a class society, there's minimal individual social participation. In one way or another, individuals become manipulated like mere objects through physical, moral and ideological coercion. Individual activity takes place only within the framework of the direct production of material goods, which mainly serve to meet the exploited class' necessities. Individual action outside this framework is illusory.

However, at those times that the class struggle is exacerbated, the level of people's general participation grows. At the same time, a leap occurs in the development of social consciousness. In those moments of rupture — extraordinary moments — spectacular acts occur within social reality. Confronted with those, individuals take a stand in conformity with their own interests. Without doubt, it's above all in these circumstances that we see revealed what Aimé Césaire discussed as the "sterile attitude of being a spectator."[\[6\]](#)

This means that reality demands that people make up their minds when faced with it, and that demand is fundamental to people's relation to the world at any given time, across all of history. We can assume as a principle that the world doesn't satisfy people, so people decide to change it through their activity. (V.I. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*) But we must remember that that human activity, that taking a stand which gets translated into practical, transformative action, is conditioned by the type of social relations existing at any given moment. And in our case, in a society where we're constructing socialism, reality also demands decisive activity and a growing level of social participation from all those individuals who compose this society. This process is only possible if accompanied by a parallel development in social consciousness.

The cinematic spectacle is inscribed within that process insofar as it reflects a tendency of the social conscience that incorporates the spectators themselves and insofar as it can affect the spectators as a stimulus, or as an obstacle, for consequent action. And when I speak about the consequent action, I am referring to this specific type of participation, historically and socially conditioned, a concrete participation which implies that people are responding adequately to the problems of social reality, especially those problems located on the ideological and political plane. What this is about, then, is stimulating and causing spectators to act in the sense of historical movement, and to shape social development.

To provoke such a response in the spectator, reality must be made problematic within the spectator. It has to express and transmit

uneasiness and open up questions. That is to say, we need an open spectacle.

But the concept of "openness" is too broad. It can be located at any level at which the artistic work operates. In and of itself, openness doesn't guarantee an effective participation on the spectator's part. However, we may have an open spectacle that provokes an uneasiness which isn't just aesthetic restlessness as its source of pleasure. It may pose conceptual or ideological dislocations. Then it becomes (without ceasing to be play, in the sense that it's all still spectacle) a serious operation because it is descending to the most profound level of reality.

Nevertheless, to gain the greatest efficacy and functionality, it is not enough that work be open — in the sense of indeterminate. The work itself must bear those premises that can bring the spectator to discern reality. That is to say, it pushes spectators into the path of truth, into coming to a dialectical consciousness about reality. Then it could operate as a real guide for action. We don't have to confuse openness with ambiguity, inconsistency, eclecticism or arbitrariness.

What can the artist depend on so as to conceive of a spectacle that would not just propose problems but would also point viewers in the direction they ought to go in order to discover for themselves a higher level of discernment? Undoubtedly art must make use of science's development of instruments for its investigative tasks. Art must apply all of the methodological resources at hand and all it can gain from information theory, linguistics, psychology, sociology, etc. Spectacle, insofar as it becomes a negative pole of the reality-fiction relation, ought to develop an apt strategy for each circumstance. Practically, spectators cannot be considered as abstractions, but rather as people who are historically and socially conditioned. In this way, the spectacle must address itself first of all to concrete spectators, in the face of whom it must unfold its operative potential to the fullest.

IDENTIFICATION AND DISTANCING: ARISTOTLE AND BRECHT

We see Tarzan jumping from tree to tree, daring to swim a river full of crocodiles, running through arrows that his enemies rain down on him. His enemies are black people who hold his female companion prisoner. Tarzan sends a huge cry into the jungle and brings the animals to help him. The monkey Cheeta participates, exteriorizing more than any of the others the various emotional states that the adventure provokes (displeasure, unhappiness, fear, trust, joy, enthusiasm). Tarzan finally smiles. He's killed a few black men and driving the rest away, and he's finally rescued his woman.

Confronting the screen where those scenes are projected (and it's been like this for a long time everywhere in the world), the audience might have both blacks and whites in it. All vibrate in unison, holding their breath in the moments of greatest danger and feeling happy at the end, when Tarzan kisses his woman and Cheeta applauds.

What's been going on? Through what mechanism can you get this kind of undifferentiated mass public, composed of people of all ages, colors, professions, sexes, *classes*, etc.? They all seem to feel the same emotions regarding an action whose profound significance threatens the moral integrity of at least a good part of that very audience. What causes that *profound significance* not to go further into the level of people's consciousness? Up to what point can viewers' class consciousness sleep during the moment of the spectacle?

Some assume, with the greatest of good will, that if we substitute a revolutionary hero for Tarzan, we could get more people to adhere to the revolutionary cause. But they do not understand that the very mechanism of identification or empathy with the hero, *if he's made into an absolute*, fixes the spectator at a point where the only thing that person can distinguish is the "bad" and the "good." Of course, viewers naturally identify with the "good," without considering what the character represents. So it's intrinsically reactionary because it doesn't work at the level of the viewers' consciousness. Far from it, it keeps consciousness asleep. (Communication occurs on every possible level, and expressive resources are valid to the degree that they are effective, no matter what channel they resort to. But what happens when identification is resorted to unconditionally is that it blocks the step to rational communication. In this sense, its operation is reactionary, no matter if directed towards revolutionary goals.) And we should note that all theater, both before and after Brecht, based itself to a certain degree on that resource.

Bertolt Brecht, whom we could justifiably nickname "the scourge of the entrancers," most systematically called our attention to identification, which has been used in Western theater since ancient Greece and which has limited extraordinarily spectacle's social function (political and ideological). Brecht understood these issues as only a German Marxist might who experienced in his youth the entire process of the ever more acute class struggle between the two world wars, with the subsequent rise of fascism. He set in opposition what he called a non-Aristotelian dramaturgy to traditional concepts, which he said were based on identification.

"We can define as Aristotelian dramaturgy (a definition from which we will derive a definition of non-Aristotelian dramaturgy) all drama which fits the definition of tragedy contained in Aristotle's *Poetics* ... From the social point of view, most interesting is the goal Aristotle attributes to tragedy: catharsis, emptying the spectator of all fear and pity, through actions which provoke fear and pity, This emptying out is achieved by a very specific psychological act: viewers' emotional *identification* with dramatic characters, recreated by actors. We'll call drama Aristotelian when it produces this identification, whether or not it uses the rules furnished by Aristotle to achieve that effect."

Further on, he writes,

"We must assume that [catharsis] is based on some form of identification. Because a free and critical position among spectators, oriented toward purely earthly solutions for problems, could not rest on the base of catharsis." (Brecht, *Writing on Theatre*)

Perhaps it would be useful to define more precisely certain shadings among these concepts. Catharsis is equivalent to an emptying, a discharge, so much so that identification leads to the idea of swept away, of involvement; that is, emotional *discharge* through affective *involvement*. Brecht claimed — following Aristotle — that it's a matter of emptying the spectator of all fear and pity through actions that provoke fear and pity. On the other hand, we can prove historically that this operation (like the counter fires ignited along the boundaries of a forest fire to halt it) has had and continues to have a primary function in theater and in spectacle in general — regulating the limits within which certain passions can be presented and sometimes impending the "fire" in spectators from extending beyond the spectacle itself. Thus we must be more cautious about openly proclaiming a kind of dry law that would assume to throw out of the theater a resource that has had such a sustained acceptance.

For Brecht, the basic resource of Aristotelian dramaturgy, used throughout the history of Western theatre, that is, identification, was an obstacle to developing viewers' critical sense and "purely terrestrial solutions for their problems." Indeed, the theater of the era in which Brecht happened to live — the fully imperialist phase of capitalism, maintained itself within canons which served to reinforce the dominant ideology and oppose the coming of revolution. To convert theater into something different, it was necessary to break with those schemes. Thus arose the idea of keeping spectators at a sufficient distance from the work so that they couldn't be limited by the fascination by which the hero's personality might exercise over them. At the same time, they should be sufficiently drawn in so that they wouldn't lose interest in what the spectacle was posing on the rational plane. That is, it's almost a tightrope operation, but many have wanted to understand it too simplistically as rejecting all of identification's resources.

The *distancing effect* that Brecht proclaimed is, in fact, a rupture within the process of identification and prevents it from culminating. It does this in a way so that spectators do not abandon themselves but conserve their lucidity and critical facilities. Really, the distancing effect doesn't pretend to do anything but arrive at, or make the spectator arrive at, a state of astonishment or surprise in the face of daily reality. It's the precondition, the first and fundamental step for those who want to know. It tries to awaken in spectators that need to understand that which can only be grasped rationally. To understand reality objectively, you must separate yourself from it, distance yourself, not be implicated emotionally. Only in this way can — and should — a capacity for

discernment be stimulated by spectacle.

Spectators discover new relations and a new meaning about all that which is familiar. "What's known in general terms, precisely because it's known, is not recognized," said Hegel in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. It is a question then of that which we do know, which forms part of our daily life, that which we're habituated to. It's being shown to us as something that we're seeing for the first time — in a way that makes surprise bloom, which creates astonishment and doubt. That is, it provokes a critical and penetrating attitude within spectators.

Some have understood this distancing effect as simply clamping down on the emotional process being developed within the spectacle. But the issue is more complex. The emotional process ought to remain in such a way that it's broken off and obliges spectators to seek compensation, still in the emotional plane. The distancing effect ought to substitute for just any emotion the specific emotion of *discovering* something, of finding a truth that had been obscured before because of fitting into daily life. And that's fundamental. Its goal is not just to distance spectators from the emotion which spectacle can produce, on the basis of a capricious aestheticism. Its goal is to reveal something new to those who think they do know. For this reason, it should accomplish that through separating out and valorizing in a new way those things that are familiar. This will only be possible if the spectators' interest is aroused so that they can come to feel, on the highest level, the emotion of rationally discovering some truth.

In film this oft-spoken-of distancing effect acquires specific modalities, still not fully explored. Just think about the simple fact that the camera can gather up isolated aspects of reality, just as daily reality presents itself to anybody. That same person is so familiar with everyday reality that s/he isn't used to going beyond appearances. In exchange for their capacity to adapt (undoubtedly a survival mechanism within a reality which is not always pleasant or easy, and never perfect), people as subjects have greatly lost to the impulse that would move them to transform reality. Nevertheless, when we see that reality on the screen, forming part of a spectacle, we see it with new eyes, in another context, and we can't fail to discover new meanings in it. This confrontation and the consequent "revelation" of new signification are no more than the seed of an attitude of "strangeness" vis-à-vis reality. It has blossomed exclusively from a purely situational act translating some isolated aspect of reality into another context. That constitutes the most elemental mechanism of distancing.

In film it's usually done in a less deliberate way than in theater, simply because the image which film captures of reality [\[7\]](#) is a "documentary" one. That image can much more easily create the illusion that one is facing reality itself. Montage creates associations. It does not just put together a series of images in unusual relations as an incentive to discover new meaning. It also can establish relations between sound and image (what Eisenstein described as "audio-visual counterpoint"), which

constitute a specifically cinematic modality for creating distancing effects. But whether it's film or theater or any other kind of spectacle that presumes to use that effect, we can't forget that it is essentially a resource for revealing new data about reality, to penetrate into reality beyond its phenomenological immediacy. Therefore, it always ought to be an effect that renews itself, because once you make a mechanism of that sort habitual, then it becomes an everyday event and loses the chance to arouse the emotion of discovery.

Yet film also has its own peculiarities in terms of the phenomenon of *identification*. The very conditions of the film spectacle (images — lights and shadows — which move on the screen, sounds which envelop the spectator) help create a sensation of isolation even when viewers are in the middle of a crowd, which they don't listen to and don't look at. This tends to provoke in the spectator something very similar to a hypnotic state, a trance state in which consciousness can remain completely asleep. In that sense, film images can be compared to those of a shared dream. Consequently, their power of persuasion or suggestion reaches a dangerous level, since it can operate on any of the senses. Suggestion has traditionally served as a resource for one class' "appropriating" the consciousness of another.

Why is this phenomenon of *identification* produced? Is it an essential element of spectacle, or can spectacle dispense with it? Doesn't it form the very basis of that impulse which takes people to the movies — to see something which moves them and remove themselves for a few minutes from their daily lives, but also to experience something which lets them recognize themselves and see themselves from another angle? Certainly these "reflections" transcend the merely psychological. As Louis Althusser notes in *For Marx*,

"If this consciousness [the consciousness of the spectators themselves] cannot be reduced to a purely psychological consciousness, if it is a social, cultural and ideological consciousness, we cannot conceive its relation to the spectacle solely in the form of a psychological identification. Indeed, before (psychologically) identifying itself with the hero, the spectatorial consciousness recognizes itself in the ideological content of the play, and in the forms characteristic of this content. Before becoming the occasion for an identification (an identification with self in the species of another), the performance is, fundamentally, the occasion for a cultural and ideological recognition. This self-recognition presupposes as its principle an essential identity (which makes the processes of psychological identification possible, insofar as they are psychological): the identity uniting spectators and actors assembled in the same place on the same evening. Yes, we are first united by an institution — the performance, but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, which govern us without our consent, by spontaneously lived ideology." (English edition ed. and trans.

by Ben Brewster; New York: Random House, 1970; pp. 150-151.)

What does this mean? If we all share an *essential identity* and if we are all *united by the same myth, the same themes, which govern us* without our paying attention to them, the (Aristotelian) spectacle normally tends to reinforce them. Even if it lays bare a criterion valorizing those myths, that is, even if they are explicitly criticized within the spectacle, that criticism will never attain much efficacy as long as the spectacle itself enacts that ideology in its external appearance, on its surface, in its immediacy.[\[8\]](#)

It's not enough, then, that the spectacle *also* bear clear ideas, revolutionary messages rationally projected upon the spectator, if the spectacle presents itself as an affirmation of those very myths which govern us without our paying attention to them and which constitute a serious obstacle for the full development (within reality, not within the spectacle) of those ideas and those messages. So that ideas don't remain imprisoned within the spectacle, the spectacle itself must demystify those aspects of reality that are manifestations — often inconsistent ones — of a reactionary ideology.

I want to put my emphasis here on the spectacle that seeks to make effective inroads on discovering reality's most profound layers — the demystifying spectacle — one which makes us advance another level in pursuing genuine consciousness. That is, the spectacle that produces a new spectator will be the one which does not exhaust itself exposing a criterion — no matter how revolutionary this criterion might be or seem, or one people could also arrive at via criticism or slogans or commonplaces.[\[9\]](#) Rather, such a spectacle thrusts spectators into the street chock full of uncertainties, with only the path indicated — the path they will have to pursue when they cease being spectators and become actors in their own life.

There's a paralyzing effect in criticizing reality but exhausting all action in the making of the critique. Such a mental process tends to consolidate the petit bourgeois mindset, in the sense that this thinking never generates practical action and does not impel people to revolutionary action but rather to decadent conformity. In the best cases, it leads to a kind of blue stocking reformism. In the final instance, it always bears within it an implicit accepting of social evil as something essentially immobile. And thus such criticism promotes utopian solutions or individual consolation. Pondering evil and its eternal character leads to resignation.[\[10\]](#)

"... all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into self-consciousness" or transformation into 'apparitions,' 'specters,' 'fancies,' etc. but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug ... not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of

theory."[\[11\]](#)

Decadent myths are not just destroyed with words. The myths are an almost immovable force. You have to use force against them. And any demystifying operation implies the need to throw them out. That's why the spectacle that sets out in that direction has to do something more than just state its proposition. It has to confront viewers as they are, but in the middle of a new reality — that is, it's the same reality but with a new significance. And this ought to stir them up.

Mythology, insofar as it's an illusory understanding, can level everything and set itself up in the center of a world deprived of all reality, in the middle of a desert populated only by imaginary figures. These fantasies have to be dissipated before viewers can be made to face reality in new ways, i.e., to stop being spectators. In this way the spectacle itself can equally serve to create or reinforce myths or help destroy them. For centuries it has occupied itself almost exclusively with the first task. And surely it will keep on creating new myths, because that is also a constant human need. But at this historical moment, the most urgent task imposed on spectacle is demystification — a task which Brecht began in his plays and theoretical writings more than fifty years ago and which we have to continue to develop. We must continue to place new demands on the relation of spectacle to spectator.

We have already seen how viewers' class consciousness can remain asleep — momentarily defenseless — during the spectacle. That seems to be one of spectacle's obvious results when it incarnates a reactionary spirit and is the ideological product of an exploiting class consciousness — that is, when it's pure "ideology," in the narrow sense. The fascination commanded by the hero in an Aristotelian drama is a resource that can elevate spirits but which usually diminishes rational thinking. Of course, this has most effect in immature spectators — in children, vulnerable because of their age, or in any kind of adolescent consciousness. Surely when we speak about people, we can't absolutely postulate the specific moment of their development, as such. Mature people are qualitatively different from children or adolescents since every moment has its specificity. Nevertheless, for a long time now, the so-called "average spectator" has been established by North American cinema (the Hollywood leisure-time spectator) as a viewer of any age, but one whose mental age corresponds to age 12. Of course, any reference to those viewers' class consciousness is set aside because it's presumed that from the moment they encounter the spectacle, they stay asleep. At least that's what Hollywood film has aimed for and what it has largely achieved.

We can even include mature spectators with a developed class consciousness, spectators "of the scientific era" — as Brecht called them — as being susceptible to undergoing that regression during the moment of the spectacle. It happens to the degree that spectacle appeals to people's feelings, to their emotions, and to the degree that it does so effectively, with sufficient elegance and appeal — sorely disputed

categories but ones which, without a doubt, have a relevant role to play in the ideological sphere.

Does this mean that those resources capable of provoking a state of fascination — especially psychological identification — ought to be tossed aside as the old garbage of an era (class society), which people should surpass as soon as possible all over the world? We know that because "fascism with its grotesque emphasis on the emotional" (as Brecht put it), could unleash insanity and gravely wound reason (which is still convalescing and not exactly recuperating, which is still vulnerable) and increase madness and barbarism to levels never before reached by humanity. Does this then mean that art, and specifically spectacle, ought to renounce feeling and emotion and all those resources that operate on this level, such as the resource of *identification*?

We know that not even Brecht himself, with his lucid, efficient, and necessary emphasis on rationality, thought that. However, a lot of Brechtian-style dogmatism fantasizes that the viewing consciousness is not yet mature unless it's coldly rational.^[12] As we confront the evidence of a world which is still working on its economic and social development, a world which has hardly gotten to pull its feet out of the swamp of prehistory, should we renounce those resources (weapons) which could turn out to have a certain kind of effectiveness in provoking a crisis within spectators' understanding? That is to say, you could use a trance to transform consciousness, to develop it, to get it out of being crystallized, ossified, passive, conforming, and irredeemably asleep.

It is interesting to note that Brecht bases his rejection of "inebriation," or the ecstasy provoked by the traditional art work, on the concept of "scattered energy," which supports Freud's well-known thesis in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Here is part of what Brecht says about Freud:

"The substitute satisfactions, such as art deals out, are illusions wielded against reality; in that, they aren't any less efficient in the psychological realm, thanks to the great role which fantasy plays in spiritual life (Freud, *Irrationality and Culture*, p. 22). Those narcotics are usually responsible for the squandering of huge amounts of energy, which could be applied to bettering human destiny" (Ibid, p. 20). (Brecht, *Writings on Theater*)

It's true that Freud refers to *life* as he knows it, that life imposed on him in the historical moment he was fated to live. The world has changed a lot since then. Nevertheless, we can ask ourselves this: Is it reasonable, consistent with a *realistic* attitude vis-à-vis the human condition to reject completely the viewers' drive to be stirred, bewitched, overwhelmed, etc.? Once Brecht himself alluded to a sentence from Francis Bacon as an emblem for realism: "You dominate nature by obeying it. People throughout history have demonstrated that anxiousness, that need. What could we have made so that need would disappear with a simple change in artistic product? We'd just be making

a superstructural change while all our earthly problems still persist — class struggle, imperialism, underdevelopment, wars, and hunger. What kind of art is effective while those problems remain in *any part of the world*?

RAPTURE AND RUPTURE: EISENSTEIN AND BRECHT

Both were born in 1898 — Eisenstein in Riga on January 23, and Brecht in Augsburg on February 10. They lived through the same epoch but in two worlds that came to oppose each other irreconcilably. Both become famous in the 20s with their early works: *POTEMKIN* (1926) and *The Three Penny Opera* (1928) achieve an immediate resonance and mark decisive moments, for they play a prominent role in the impetuous advance of a revolution that will shake the foundations upon which rest the bourgeois conception of film and theater. The important thing for both men was to advance the spectator's being armed with reason. They worked toward an immediate practical goal: to contribute through their artistic work toward transforming people and speeding up human development.

In terms of that goal, they strove to make their arts the most efficacious possible, and thus they came to confront aesthetic problems with the rigor of a scientist and the stance of a militant. They nourished themselves from some common sources, from which they extracted everything that could enrich their creative activity, everything that could bring them new expressive resources, everything that could be assimilated. So they read from Meyerhold to Joyce, passing by way of Japanese and Chinese theater, the circus, the music hall, Freud, Eisenstein — but, above all, Marx as the basis of everything, as foundation and guide. That is, both men depended, in their aesthetic searching, on dialectical materialism. Both upheld its goals and its findings in their very conception of the world.

Nevertheless, Eisenstein proposes in *Film Form*:

"To make spectators 'go outside themselves' as far as they can, we find ourselves obliged to recommend a 'guide' to them, following which they would enter into the desired condition."

He then makes it more precise:

"The most simple 'prototype' of such imitative behavior would be, of course, that of entranced viewers who are up with a character on the screen who is overwhelmed by pathos, a character who, in one way or another, has come to be 'outside' of him or her self."

On the other hand, Brecht declares:

"This magical operation ought to be combated. We have to renounce everything which represents an attempt to

hypnotize, everything which tries to provoke ecstasy and obliteration." (*Writing on Theatre, I*)

It's clear that, in spite of their having not only common viewpoints but a whole philosophical base in common, these two artists traveled very different paths and in some aspects diverging ones.

Everything seems to indicate that there is no compromise between the two. We immediately discover that while one exalts passion, the other chooses the path of reason. While the one wants spectators *committed emotionally* to the spectacle, the other wants them to be *separate*, distant, analytical, and rational. As Eisenstein writes in *Film Form*:

"Pathos demonstrates its effect when spectators are impelled to jump out of their seats if they are sitting, let themselves fall down if they are standing, to applaud and scream. It's when their eyes shine with enthusiasm before filling up with tears of pleasure — in a word, when spectators are obliged to 'jump out of themselves.'"

"To employ a more elegant term, I'd say that the effect of a pathetic work consists in producing ecstasy in spectators. I need not add anything more because the symptoms which I've described before clearly expressed this: *ex-stasis*: literally, 'to be outside of oneself,' which is the same as saying 'carried away' or 'different from one's ordinary way of being.'"

This *emotional commitment* would be arrived at "most simply" through an "imitative behavior" (Aristotelian *mimesis*), that is, viewers' *identification* with the character represented in the spectacle. This "different way of being" also implies a *separation* from oneself. On the one hand, that establishes a "different" way of looking at things — at daily reality. It also means an *upheaval*, an *alienation* from oneself. Eisenstein himself feels obliged to justify such a "magical" operation:

"'To go out of oneself' doesn't mean going to *nothingness*. To go out of oneself implies, inevitably, a transition to something distinctly different, to something qualitatively different, to something opposed to what was before (from immobility to movement, from silence to noise, etc.)" (*Film Form*).

That is, this "transition" to something different only means, then, a *movement* in the process of transforming spectators. It's a negative movement, which has no reason to extend beyond its own limits, that is, the limits of spectacle itself. For Eisenstein, there's a moment in which spectators move away from themselves, stop being themselves so as to live within an *other* — in the character. That moment is invested with a special interest insofar as it constitutes the premise of a desirable change. And for Eisenstein, this change is produced — or at least originates — in an environment of feeling, in the emotional, in a state of

ecstasy. As he writes in *Film Form*:

"I mean by *culminating moments*, those instances of a process in which water has been converted into a new substance, steam; ice into water; or the ingot of iron into steel. In this case, it also means people "going out of themselves, a changing of state, the shift from one quality into another quality, 'ecstasy.'"

Brecht also wants to produce a transformation in spectators, a change which would lead people to better understand themselves and their social environment, and thus effectively to rule both themselves and their world. As he puts it in *Writings on Theatre*:

"We must change all of theatre. The changes can't be made just in the text, the actor, or the scenery. Spectators must also enter into the process. Their attitude must be modified."

He appeals more to spectators' reason than to sentiment and warns that "spectators must not identify with the characters, but rather argue about them." To that end, he proposes a mechanism of alienation or ending absent-mindedness in the viewers' relation to the characters. But it is opposite to what Eisenstein proposes in his "pathetic structure." With the *distancing effect*, Brecht tries to alienate, make strange, disrupt spectators, not from themselves but from the characters (or, in a broader sense, from the dramatic situation being developed in front of them, the spectacle itself, the fiction). Spectators, Brecht tells us,

"shouldn't be drawn out of their world to be transported to the world of art. There is no need to sweep them away. On the contrary they should be inserted into their own real world, with all their senses alert."

Brecht appeals to spectators' reason. He tries to stimulate their critical faculty, so that this *distanciation*, more than being *swept away*, would effect a genuine *rupture*, since it means restoring spectators to their reality, their world, with a new attitude. Ultimately it means restoring the spectators to themselves.

Why, if both artists begin with the same philosophical principles and from the same revolutionary position, do they offer such diametrically opposed solutions to the same problem? At what point would we find their respected positions antagonistic and irreconcilable?

Clearly, we're dealing with two unique and very different personalities. There couldn't have been any easy dialogue between the two. After filming *THE OLD AND THE NEW*, Eisenstein traveled extensively abroad and worked on various film projects, among which the best known and the most dramatically frustrated was what he shot in Mexico. Before that, he'd been in Berlin around the end of 1929. There he surely got to know Brecht. Marie Seton's testimony in *Sergei M. Eisenstein* is pretty eloquent about this:

"Equally curious, indeed, a little off-putting, was the dry, bloodless energy which Eisenstein felt in Bertolt Brecht, whose abrupt verses and satirical pieces coldly bored into the guts of social hypocrisy. Sergei M. thought that Brecht was a tenacious teacher wielding a pneumatic drill against consciousness' stone wall, which Brecht could not tear down with the fire of his passion."

Beyond the peculiarities of each man's personality, we must not forget that they expressed themselves in media with many traits and elements in common but also with their own specific properties: that is, film and theater. Eisenstein began in theater, but according to his own testimony,[\[13\]](#) even while directing theater he was thinking about film. In 1923 when he put on Ostrovsky's theatrical work, *Wise Men Are Too Simple*, he included in the stage directions a film short, a little comic film. After that, film fills his life, not just as a medium of artistic expression but also as an object of intense theoretical speculation.

Brecht on the other hand, is completely a man of the theater. If on a few occasions he approached film, we can't say that he had much luck with that medium, which he came to reject with bitterness. He never considered film language in its specificity. He didn't really understand the resources which film itself might offer him and saw in it only a technical medium facilitating the mounting of a theatrical work. Brecht found very narrow expressive limits in film, which kept him from appreciating the possibilities of an "epic" cinema — in a sense in which he employed that term. He could not conceive of a "non-Aristotelian" cinema, a cinema that finally wouldn't be a dream or a substitute for reality but rather a mobilizer of viewers' consciousness. In theater, the distancing effect finds its most effective vehicle in the actors' roles. That's why Brecht insisted on this aspect.

On the contrary, in cinema there're a lot of other possibilities. In general, there's "composition," in the way that Eisenstein talked about it; it's made up of various elements (framing, narration, music — in a word, audio-visual montage) and rests its effectiveness on the form in which those are structured. But Eisenstein himself in going this route encountered obstacles, which caused him to disperse his forces in a formalist search. Nevertheless it's not fair to characterize him simply as a formalist without remembering the historical necessity for that search. It was the logical consequence of the process of creating a new language, a new means of expression whose laws and syntax could only spring up after longterm practical work and an attention fully concentrated on the formal aspects of cinema. Movies are a baby art. Theater is not, and was not at the moment when Brecht encountered it. It had already had a long evolution and had become consolidated formally. This allowed Brecht to center his attention primarily on problems of content.

Both theater and film utilize multiple expressive resources (image, word and music), and in both, diverse elements can be combined, integrated, or added together in different forms and to various degrees. Thus people

often speak about "theatrical" films or "cinematic" theater, which only indicates that both media can exchange influences, resources, achievements, and postures. But one specific trait that makes film different from theater can help us understand Brecht and Eisenstein's contradictory positions.

Film generally manifests itself primarily as a visual language, while theater gives more weight to words. Images particularize and restrict signification to the concreteness of objects, while words permit generalizing and expressing ideas, concepts and abstractions about certain images, and this expression goes well beyond the object itself. Such images in the immediacy of their cinematic representation, and out of the interplay of relations promoted by cinema's artistic exercise, can turn out to be very suggestive, even moving. That is, they appeal directly to the senses and accommodate themselves more to the emotional plane. But they also undeniably establish narrow limits in terms of what could be called their reach — for communicating in the conceptional, abstract, and rational plane. Thus all Eisenstein's efforts to express concepts through the collision of images — intellectual montage — did not let him attain his goals without the help of the word. Still, those efforts have borne a later fruit in broadening cinema's expressive possibilities.

But more than personality or the medium each favored to express himself, the determining factor was each man's social context: Eisenstein was 19 when the Bolsheviks took power and began the most radical transformation of reality in modern times in a good part of the world. He experienced, therefore, all his artistic formation in the midst of the effervescence of the revolution's first years, the years of the Proletkult and other excesses. He paid attention to all the movements of the international, artistic avant-garde which were flourishing then and which in the Soviet countries were going to assume a new physiognomy. Thus he saw futurism, constructivism, cine-eye, Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, Tatlin, Malevich, the demystifying of "art" and the consecrating of "life" — experimentation, propaganda. But in those years, cinema was the medium which best expressed the revolution ("collective art *par excellence* destined for the masses"). It wasn't accidental that sometimes Lenin referred to film as the most important art. And the Russian films produced a grand impact because of their connection to that movement which saw their birth, and because of their authenticity and renewed force, a force that derived from the very reality, which had engendered them.

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JUMP CUT

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Brecht passed the same years very differently. The failure of the revolution in Germany, inflation, the sharpening of class struggle, poverty, unemployment, and the consequent rise of fascism to power — in 1933 Brecht embarked down the path of an exile (Vienna, Paris, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and finally the United States). His works were prohibited and burned by the Nazis. It wasn't until 1948, the same year that Eisenstein died, that Brecht returned to Germany. He settled in Berlin, where he dedicated himself mostly to staging his plays.

In general terms, Eisenstein clearly lived through a moment of exultation, of forces being born, of triumph and affirmation, of emotional *identification*. In contrast, Brecht lived through "dark times," decadence, defeat, barbarism, rejection and condemnation, times of rational *separation* which demanded an extraordinary lucidity and a solid critical stance. [14] Thus it happens that Eisenstein places primary emphasis on emotional *commitment* in his premise about how spectators change at the same time that Brecht rejects such a resource and puts the entire emphasis on reason, *distance*, and a critical stance — which he thought of as "active, executive, positive" (*Writings on Theater*). These men's disciples (above all, Brecht's, whose "fashion" has been less explosive but more lasting) have traversed one or the other path unilaterally — some with real fanaticism. The followers often don't see the breadth of the issue, nor do they perceive those points at which both paths coincide.

Thus some seem able to discern in Eisenstein a kind of theoretical development which led him from his first "montage of attractions" [15] (which is based on the montage of psychic stimuli, influenced by Pavlov's reflexology) to his theory of "intellectual montage." Eisenstein's followers propose using this latter to attain a "rational" cinema, that is, a cinema which reaches the spectators' intellect, which makes them understand intellectually, beyond emotional identification.

When Eisenstein was only 22 and still hadn't done anything important artistically, significantly he came to the conviction, as he tells us, that insofar as art offered a world of fiction as a relief for the dissatisfactory

aspects of reality, then it was not just a deception but a real danger for the advance and development of society. Above all, it was true in the moment he was living through, when they needed everyone's forces kept tense, and participating in the revolutionary "leap." Eisenstein found an echo for his uneasiness among the sectors of LEF (Left Front for Art) who cherished an "active hate against art." Nevertheless, as the young artist grew and matured and as he mastered effective expressive resources, he decided that it was less suitable to polish off that art than to utilize it. As he put it:

"The dethroned queen [art] could be useful for our common cause. It does not deserve to wear the crown. But why don't we let it wash floors for a while? After all, influencing people's minds through art has a certain importance. If the young proletarian state must fulfill all the urgent tasks facing it, it will have to exert a lot of influence over people's hearts and minds."

Certainly, if at first Eisenstein dedicated all his energy toward directing viewers' sentiments in a specific direction (political education, propaganda), later he suggested in *Film Form* that the new cinema should also guide "all thought processes." We see here that — in spite of what Eisenstein sometimes and perhaps too greatly emphasized, the director's predominant role — he was drifting little by little toward other mechanisms which might elicit "contradictions in people's minds." Thus it's clear that he does not intend to address his work to passive, hypnotized spectators, but rather to spectators in whom he can provoke conflicts, spectators who can be moved and stimulated. He didn't propose these formal investigations as ends in themselves, but rather as the necessary steps to achieve the greatest effectiveness vis-à-vis the spectator. This relation is established (and Eisenstein was very aware of this) not only on the basis of aesthetic pleasure, but also as part of film's inevitable ideological repercussion. Thus, he comes to consider the possibilities within spectacle for provoking a "new vision" in spectators (that is, the same thing Brecht was pursuing with the distancing effect), but he does not go much beyond pointing it out. He does not advance our knowledge about those mechanisms which cinema might put into practice so as to achieve that effect.

In 1939 Eisenstein writes an essay about "Film Structure," which appears in *Film Form*. There he points out that

"one of the most difficult problems in constructing an art work — one which particularly concerns the most exciting part of our work — is the *problem of representing a stance toward the thing represented*."

Then he asks:

"With what methods and what means should the event which is expressed cinematically be manipulated? We need to demonstrate simultaneously two things: that this is the event

and here's how the characters think about themselves and about what's going on; and also here's how the author relates to that event and how s/he wants the spectators to receive it, to feel about it, and to react to it."

Later Eisenstein develops interesting ideas about "composition," insofar as it can be understood as "a law about the construction of a representation." He takes as his point of departure *human emotional behavior*: "If you utilize as your source *the structure of human emotion*, *you will unfailingly awaken emotion*." Inevitably will surge forth that complex of feelings that were the origins of the composition.

What about when we're dealing with a representation where the author's stance is opposed to the apparent meaning of the represented event, that is, when the author's attitude is distanced and critical? Then the compositional scheme will respond structurally to the emotional state generated in the author, based on the author's relation to the represented act. Consequently, it will tend to provoke in the spectator — through an emotional mechanism — a critical judgment about it.[\[16\]](#)

This means that Eisenstein proposed *pathos* as the generator of change in spectators. That change also ought to operate effectively on the rational level and thus would aid critical judgment. Eisenstein said in *Film Form* that *intellectual cinema* "set as its task restoring the emotional plenitude to intellectual process." Thus, a certain *movement* ought to be accomplished in intellectual cinema in its spectacle-spectator relation. This can be posed schematically in these terms: from image to feeling and from feeling to idea (or to the thesis). This means a series of images provoke an affective (emotional) feeling which then awakens a whole series of ideas (reason).[\[17\]](#) Intellectual montage breaks with narrative montage. It is epic in the traditional sense. As Eisenstein writes in *Film Form*,

"Film also has a mission, to create precise intellectual concepts derived from the dynamic collision of opposed passions."

Eisenstein's final goal was to arrive at reason, at intellectual comprehension. And it's not so surprising then that he expressed an interest in filming *Capital*. The fact that he did not do so surely means that he had not yet found the appropriate artistic means to do it. For we know he couldn't fully develop his concept of intellectual montage. He himself put forth these ideas in their embryonic state, as the first steps toward that synthesis of art and science to which he always aspired. But the important thing is that he lived to the very end of his life dedicated to developing cinema's expressive possibilities in such a way that someday a director could create, via that medium, something equivalent to *Capital*.

What was Brecht's trajectory during those same years? Like Eisenstein, he was born in the lap of the bourgeoisie. His first work, *Baal* (1919), presents an asocial, clever and, hedonistic character — versus the

traditional hero, the kind that's a cult object for the bourgeoisie. All of Brecht's youthful output is stamped by waves of lyricism, anarchy, irony, skepticism, and nihilism. Thus he thought he could hurl himself willfully against the values of the bourgeois world. He assaulted it with words, bothered it, made faces at it, and set out grotesque scarecrows. But finally this also served, in some way, as more or less exciting entertainment for the bourgeoisie, which liked to get swept away in its search for strong emotions. That hardly controlled poetic eruption began to define its artistic and revolutionary goals. Brecht proceeded to arm himself theoretically and scientifically, to become more self-disciplined. At the same time he viscerally reaffirmed his rejection of "those spectators [who] left their reason behind in the coatroom along with their overcoat" (*Writings on Theatre, I*).

Brecht then begins to discuss *epic* theater, narrative theater that keeps a certain distance in relation to the events it presents. Brecht counterpoises it to *dramatic* theater, that which makes spectators "live" an event by exacerbating the event's conflicting elements. Brecht is not alone. Others have started down that path before him, following an urgent social demand. Piscator is among them, with his political theater. But Brecht has the merit of having gone the farthest, not just at the level of theoretical systematization, but also in artistic elaboration.

In 1930, writing his observations about the opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City Mahagonny*, Brecht sets forth a scheme where he demonstrates the displacement of values as we move from dramatic theater to epic theater. It's interesting to observe that this scheme, this kind of summary of his ideas about theater, somehow establishes a line to follow in his future works. In this essay, Brecht himself tells us,

"This schema does not present absolute oppositions, but merely displacements in accent. Similarly, within the process of communication, you can favor that which suggests through feeling or else that which persuades through reason."

That is, he never absolutely excludes the route of sentiment. But he emphasizes the need to work with rational arguments, to awaken spectators' intellectual activity, to offer spectators knowledge, and to bring them — through sensations — to political consciousness.

The scientific rigor which Brecht imposed upon himself leads him to postulate that what's needed is a new spectator, one able to grasp the events set forth on the stage in all their complexity. This should happen in such a way so as to induce the audience to question their own behavior, and so as to insure that at no moment would they identify with the characters nor let themselves be carried away by the mere pleasure of experiencing the life of another. But to acquire that attitude, spectators ought to educate themselves for it, through studying, lived experience, etc. Although Brecht admits the role emotions play in an artwork, he rejects the mechanism of identification as the only way to produce them. He then devotes himself to the task of rationally

expressing spectators' interests and sees there can be no interests more legitimate than ceaselessly improving social relations (in the sense of social progress, development, and revolution) in a world where its inhabitants are always having to act "in self-defense" (*On Theatre, I*). In 1929 Brecht stated decisively, "Only a new goal would make a new art possible and the new goal is pedagogy" (*Writings on Theatre, I*).

He then addresses himself primarily to a proletarian public, speaking to it directly and rationally, trying to teach it dialectics and raise its consciousness. That is the one line he scrupulously follows in his didactic plays, where he works with a mixture of rigor and asceticism. It notably reduces his effective range, because he is dealing with a public which goes to the theater looking for enjoyment. The proletariat also prefers diversion — workers go to bed for sex or just because they are very tired. Brecht sees then the complexity of dialectics. After *Mahagonny* and, above all, in *The Three Penny Opera* (1928), he doesn't find the resonance again until *Mother Courage* (1938), with which he reaches a level of maturity, complexity and effectiveness that he will maintain in his final works, those which make him the most important playwright of our time.

Starting with *Mother Courage*, Brecht makes room in his works for other traditional theatrical elements, which now he can manipulate with a complete understanding of the medium. He bases his work on an explicit understanding that theater's most important and noble function is to "entertain," provide pleasure and diversion — and that that function is justifiable in and of itself. On that basis, Brecht develops, in all its complexity, his concept of pleasure as a concrete, historically determined phenomenon. Thus he proposes a type of pleasure determined by the circumstances of our era, which he calls the "scientific era." That leads him to traditional dramatic resources like intensifying the conflict or plot and even using identification, but these will no longer be permitted to carry people away. Rather, Brecht will make use of them for his own ends, goals that he sketched out in his youth and which now he can fully attain.

Thus he insists on the need to surpass the opposition, "reason vs. emotion" (*Work Journal, I*).

"We can attribute the separation between reason and sentiment to the functioning of conventional theater, which strives to abolish reason" (*Writing on Theatre, I*).

He affirms,

"In Aristotelian theater empathy is also mental; non-Aristotelian theater must also resort to an emotional critique" (*Work Journal, I*).

Brecht is opposed to the hero who, in an idealist sense, incarnates in his actions an atemporal truth. In contrast are people, in their historical and material sense, who assume, without hypocrisy, the concrete truth that

"to live you have to need to eat, drink, live under a roof, get dressed, and a few more things (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*). Thus, Brecht establishes himself on a level of immediacy, which facilitates not just rational communication but also real emotional understanding on the part of the spectator.

We've already seen that Eisenstein also proposed a synthesis of science and art and repeatedly had to defend himself against those who wanted to attribute to him the intention of separating reason from feeling. If, on the one hand, Eisenstein goes from "image to feeling and from feeling to idea," Brecht goes one step more and lets us know that although feeling can stimulate reason, reason in turn purifies our feelings. Paradoxically Eisenstein, that most passionate man, directs his investigative labor towards *the logic of emotions* at the same time that Brecht, apparently a colder personality and in any case more rigorous, is won over by *the emotion of logic*.

It would be an error, therefore, to encapsulate Brecht within *distanciation* and Eisenstein within *pathos* without keeping in mind the very shadings within each tendency, shadings that draw them together and which let us establish a bridge between each. But we also err if, carried away by a desire for coherence and basing ourselves on the common principles underlying both positions, we try to suppress the contradiction that separates them. That contradiction does exist, and it is possible to discover its objective causes, as we've seen in both the social context of each artist as well as the medium which each uses for expression. And it's not just a question of differing emphases — one placing emphasis on reason and the other on feeling. It's also the fact that each one developed different mechanisms so as to arrive at "an emotional comprehension" of spectacle.

Above all, there are mutually exclusive points, private aspects of each theory that would be difficult to combine: Brecht radically rejected a state of ecstasy in the spectator and Eisenstein proposed ecstasy. The divergence between both can be logically surpassed only if we consider Eisenstein's *pathos* and Brecht's *distanciation* as two *moments* of the same dialectical process (rapture-rupture) within which each artist isolated and emphasized a different phase. In a broad sense both concepts form part of the same attitude toward film or theater and, indeed, toward life. But in a strict sense they are opposed to each other, contradictory. Neither, in isolation, can fully achieve its proposed goal, which can be accomplished only through a process into which both concepts enter into play. All the moments are necessary — sentiment, identification with characters, and ecstasy, as much as reason, a critical stance, and lucidity.

It's not a question of diluting one with the other, from eclectic positions. Rather, it's a question of explaining the artists' thinking and passions and, finally, their effects. Both men represent two poles in dialectical relation, opposed but interpenetrating. The most fertile aspects of their contribution can be concretized only if based on an

effective stance vis-à-vis the artist's historical moment and the expressive medium used. In socialism as well as capitalism, in theater as well as in film, you can find an accomplished version of both positions, but only when they've been incorporated as a moment in the historical/artistic process in which they are inscribed. It is a dialectic of reason and passion that exists within the framework of the spectacle/spectator relation.

A healing dream, erotic ecstasy, play, being swept away, or the pathos provoked by an artwork can also be productive moments in people's relation to the world in which they're immersed. But it is always on condition that those states be transcended, because people are forced to return to reality. I'm referring to normal, mature people, who act in accord with their concrete, real, objective interests, and who in their *free time* go to the movies where they can enjoy a spectacle in the same way that they might go have a few drinks or make love. That state of "separation," of drunkenness, can be consoling and a way of recuperating one's energies, but even more so, it can be a way of generating energy. All normal mature people live in reality. When it begins to be grounded in illusion (whether we call it drunkenness, fiction, or absent-mindedness), we can say we are confronted with a pathological state. And those cases require special treatment.

We therefore have two moments in the spectacle/spectator relation: on the one hand, *pathos*, ecstasy, absent-mindedness; on the other, *distancing*, recognizing reality, rupture. The movement from one state to the other can happen various times as the spectacle unfolds. The movement which spectators experience as the spectacle passes from one dialectical pole to the other is analogous to what they experience moving from everyday reality into the cinema, and vice versa. This leaving everyday reality to submerge yourself into a fictional reality, an autonomous world in which you recognize yourself, after which you return enriched by the experience — this is also a movement of getting lost and then setting the rapture or absent-mindedness aside.

We've seen that Brecht principally is challenging the traditional spectacle/spectator relation by virtue of which spectators are entranced to the point of confusing *illusion* with *reality*. This is Brecht's great revolutionary contribution to theater and, by extension, to any spectacle that offers us an *image* of reality — that is, an *illusion of reality*. He systematized the aesthetic resources of distancing, which let us opt for a spectacle that is not offered as a substitute for reality but rather as an elucidating instrument — a depth probe — which makes reality clearer and more profound through a *fiction* that is presented as fiction. Clearly when talking about film and fiction, we're talking about an *illusion* but not necessarily about deception or error, rather about *play*. We can — and must — treat it as an illusion, the quality of which we are aware and which we presuppose. In order that an illusion offer us not only aesthetic pleasure but also teaching and stimulus, it's necessary that it be fully accomplished, that it exhaust all its own resources, in such a way that "the paints yield to the painting." ("Our representations

ought to yield the foreground to the reality which they represent, social life." *Writings on Theater*, III.)

A process is fulfilled when people momentarily take on the condition of the spectator so as to afterwards reintegrate themselves into daily reality. We can compare Brecht and Eisenstein's points of view here to help clarify the process that happens during the phase of the spectacle/spectator relation, that is, at the moment of the fiction. The new rules of the game under which that relation is being produced not only permit the spectators' spiritual enrichment and better understanding of reality on the basis of an aesthetic experience, but also facilitate a critical stance by the spectators themselves toward the reality which includes them. Spectators will stop being that vis-à-vis reality and will face it not as something given but as a process the development of which they are involved in.

Notes

(numbered consecutively following from Part One)

5. Brecht said, "The bourgeoisie passes beyond, in the theater, the threshold of another world which has no relation at all to daily life. It enjoys there a kind of venal emotion in the form of a drunkenness which eliminates thought and judgment." Quoted in V. Klotz, *Bertolt Brecht*, p. 138.

6. "And, above all, my body, like my soul, is guarded with arms crossed in the sterile attitude of a spectator, because life isn't spectacle, because a sea of pain isn't a proscenium, because a man who's screaming isn't a dancing bear."

7. Brecht in *Writings on Theater* states: "The distancing effect consists in transforming the thing which you wish to make explicit, the one you want to draw attention to. You want to get it to stop being an ordinary, well-known immediate object so as to turn it into something special, noteworthy, and unexpected. In a certain sense, what's been known too well ends up as not 'understood,' but your only goal is to make it more understandable."

8. The film *BURN* offers us an eloquent example of contrast between its explicit message — set out verbally through spoken language and through words which encompass concepts and ideas that are definitively revolutionary and specifically anti-colonial — and its implicit myth about Europe's "immutable" superiority — expressed not just through Marlon Brando's potent and dynamic image and charismatic personality and the dramatic situations where he shows himself to be always above the people's drama, but also through the film's very "treatment," what others would call its "structural dynamics" (Althusser). Perhaps that's using a stricter criterion but equally referring to the phenomenal, the immediate, the formal — which, in this case, may correspond to the filmmakers' unconsciously paternalistic attitude.

9. Slogans have their appropriate moments. Then they express an urgent

necessity, and at that moment they have the greatest efficacy. "Slogans are excellent, flashy, and raise spirits, but they lack something fundamental," said Lenin in "On Revolutionary Phraseology." When they exceed their appropriate moment, slogans turn into pure rhetoric. Then they can only have an effect on the person whom Lenin himself called "a revolutionary sentimentalist" — i.e., someone for whom revolution is something like a religion. I don't have to stop to explain all this obviously implies in terms of being an obstacle to the full development of consciousness.

[10.](#) As Yuri I. Surovtsev stated in *In the Labyrinth of Revisionism*: "For that (petit bourgeois) mindset, reality is doubly terrible. They are terrified by and indignant at the evil it contains, but they are shocked by as frequently indignant at revolutionary violence as the method of transforming it."

[11.](#) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pp. 58-59.

[12.](#) "Epic theater does not combat emotions, but rather it examines them and doesn't hesitate to provoke them" (Brecht, *Writings on Theater*).

"Dramatic art has no reason to completely set identification aside. But it should — and can without losing its artistic character — leave a path open for the spectator's critical stance" (Brecht, *Writings on Theater*).

"12/1/41. We must never forget that non-Aristotelian theater is just one form of theater. It serves specific social goals and does not have a significance which usurps all others, in terms of theater in general. In certain plays I myself may use Aristotelian theater alongside non-Aristotelian theater. If I were to put on stage today, for example, *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, it might suit me to produce a certain identification with Joan (from a contemporary point of view, I might say, allow a certain identification with her). This would be the case only when the character undergoes a process of self-recognition: and empathy will help spectators to see clearly the essential elements of the situation" (Brecht, *Work Diary*, I).

[13.](#) "My cinematographic tendencies began three years earlier with the filming of *THE MEXICAN*, 1920." (Eisenstein, Ediciones ICAIC.)

[14.](#) "To criticize the course of a river means, in this case, to improve it, correct it. Social criticism is revolution. That's the executive, finished criticism." (Brecht, *Writings on Theater*).

[15.](#) "The basic elements of theater are born from the spectators themselves and what we direct to the spectator in a specific sense. Attraction (as we analyze theater) is all of those aggressive moments in the spectator, that is, all the elements which awake in the spectator those feelings or that kind of psychology which influences his or her sensations, all elements which could be demonstrated and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks or

collisions in an adequate order within that combination. It's the only medium through which you can make the final ideological conclusion perceptible." (Eisenstein, *Film Sense*, Edicion Lautaro)

Of course, this theory of "montage of attraction" or "artistic stimulants," as Eisenstein elsewhere called it, has a fundamental validity. But it is not everything that you can do. Even more, we might point out that the hypertrophy of that stance (or that method) leads to an authoritarianism, because directors have within their reach so many expressive resources which could emotionally condition spectators in a specific direction — and there's no reason to suppose it's always the best direction. Nevertheless, we must not discount this phenomenon as a possible phase in the process of artistic communication. It could have a revolutionary effectiveness if those aggressive or irritating moments which Eisenstein talked about served to stimulate spectators to discover answers for themselves and, as a result, to act on reality. That is, if the tactic does not impose a paralyzing response.

[16.](#) "The author establishes the decisive factors of his/her compositional structure on the basis of his relation to phenomena. This dictates the structure and characteristics, through which the portrayal itself is unfolded. Losing none of its reality, the portrayal emerges from this immeasurably enriched in both intellectual and emotional qualities." (Eisenstein, *Film Form*)

[17.](#) "To accuse me of tearing the emotional from the intellectual is without any foundation. Quite the contrary I wrote: 'Dualism in the sphere of 'feelings' and 'rationality' must be completely overcome by this new form of art. It is necessary to give back the intellectual process its fire and passion, to dunk the abstract thinking process into the boiling material of reality.'" (Marie Seaton, *Eisenstein*)

The Other Francisco Creating history

by Julia Lesage

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"People who want an unobtrusive lesson really do not want a lesson at all." — Bertolt Brecht^[1]

Didacticism plays a major role in Third World filmmaking. That is, films made by militant Third World filmmakers outside U.S. and European production and distribution systems have to assume several cultural tasks at once. Their films uncover national history and indigenous culture, kept hidden for so long. Furthermore, they try to provide new viewing experiences that will decolonize ordinary peoples reception of the mass media. Revolutionary consciousness is often held back by U.S. and European values, which have inundated Third World cinemas and televisions for years.

For example, Hollywood films and stale old television programs like "I Love Lucy" or "McHale's Navy" play over and over in dubbed versions throughout Latin America, long after they are laid to rest or relegated to late night cable television here. Viewers love them. Hollywood's high production values and fantasy scenarios set in lavish surroundings insure the films appeal. Sometimes a national film industry also creates popular feature films but often through even more formulaic genres. Thus Mexico's singing caballero productions and Argentina's white telephone middleclass sexual-triangle films have long runs, often re-circulated year after year, especially in rural areas. More recently, most Latin American capitals offer the same pornographic films available in any large city in the United States, Japan, or Europe. Such an international distribution of pornography, as well as massive U.S. and European-style advertising, erases national differences in sexual attitudes and overlays a powerfully imaged, imperialist version of sexual politics. Furthermore, especially in urban areas, most families, even poor ones, aspire to owning a television set, even though it costs at least four times what it would in its country of origin.

In revolutionary Latin America, as in Cuba or Nicaragua, the new

government must immediately begin to decolonize the media — in order to promote national identity and new habits of reception in spectators. These two countries have approached this task by creating national film institutes, prioritizing the use of expensive imported filmmaking materials and also recognizing mass media's power as a social institution. These institutes produce films, train new filmmakers, and create new distribution modes, even if leaving old distribution networks intact, as in Nicaragua with its mixed capitalist and socialist economy.

Contemporary revolution occurs where media institutions already exist and where people's viewing habits and preferences are already formed. And left revolutionary governments usually reject as national policy, media puritanism, that is, "protecting" the citizenry from foreign culture, as was tried in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Latin American revolutions have taken place and are being waged now in countries tied historically and economically to the United States. Cuba and Nicaragua have never expected to separate their people from wanting U.S. things. In Cuban movie theaters, pirated dubbed versions of Hollywood films run several months or a year after their U.S. release.

In Nicaragua, INCINE, the national film institute, took over and runs about 40% of the movie theaters, formerly owned by Somozistas, and screens mainly U.S. and European films, selected for artistic value or political progressiveness. In fact, that's what's available. Nicaragua's television is state run; similarly, each day Managua's television programs include one or more U.S. or European films, as well as U.S. television serials such as "Wonder Woman," "Star Trek," and "The Incredible Hulk." Contemporary Third World revolutions accept the complexity of their people's relation to the mass media and are trying various approaches to changing media forms and modes of reception.

Teshome Gabriel calls cinema made either within Third World revolutions or by militant filmmakers in pre-revolutionary societies "Third Cinema" — a cinema resisting both imperialism and the dominant media's ideology, without necessarily rejecting that media entirely.

"... The principal characteristic of Third Cinema is ... the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays. The Third Cinema is that cinema of the Third World which stands opposed to imperialism and class oppression in all their ramifications and manifestations ..."

"In selecting the themes and styles for his or her work, the filmmaker's choice is both ideologically determined and circumscribed. Since the filmmaker disclaims a non-class or above-class ideology, he/she is necessarily committed to a certain ideological mode of presentation and a codified way of interpreting not only culture but reality itself."

"Chiefly, film in a Third World context seeks to a) decolonize minds, b) contribute to the development of a radical

consciousness, c) lead to a revolutionary transformation of society, and d) develop a new film language with which to accomplish these tasks."[\[2\]](#)

Ideally, Third Cinema creates in the viewer an understanding of imperialism's mechanisms, including an understanding of how imperialism uses the mass media.[\[3\]](#) It also sparks an impulse to act. It is an empowering cinema, not a cinema of spectacle received by a passive, entranced audience. It may be a Brechtian cinema. But, because it is a revolutionary cinema, it must also be popular. It bridges the gap between viewing habits already shaped by well-loved, imperialist film and television, and revolutionary viewing habits.

It is in this context that *THE OTHER FRANCISCO*, a Cuban feature film about slavery and about an abolitionist novel parallel in importance to our *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (written ten years before *Uncle Tom*), has a special significance for anyone considering how to teach through fictional film. This work, made in 1975 by Cuban director Sergio Giral, stands as a model for one kind of Brechtian cinema made within a revolution.[\[4\]](#) It is heavily didactic. At the same time — or because of that — it hooks the viewer into its narrative flow by using a certain kind of narrative tension and romantic, intensely emotionally coded images. It has a verbally saturated, expository sound track, which often uses interviews and voice-over narration, and it also has a powerful emotional force.

There is a constant interplay between the film's emotionally coded elements and its lengthy voice-over statements and interviews. This interplay lets us critique from shifting perspectives the filmed fiction, the visual cinematic elements used to present that fiction (i.e., the visual coding of dominant cinema), the institution of slavery, the bourgeois documentation of slavery, and the class position of the intellectual. The film provides an added emotional pleasure beyond its depiction of love, oppression, and rebellion — that is, it gives pleasure in learning, what Godard, borrowing from Nietzsche, entitled "le gai savoir." *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* teaches viewers how to evaluate the class nature of information in general so that it encourages viewers how to think about the class nature of what they read and what they see on film or television. As Brecht desired, this film sets up a process of learning which only begins with the viewing experience. The learning process continues as spectators apply the film's analytic strategy to the flow of information they receive in their daily life.

THE PRACTICAL ACTIVITY OF THE REVOLUTION

"My father is Cuban and my mother is from the United States ... After I finished high school here in Cuba, I went to New York to live and work [in 1954] ... All kinds of work: washing dishes, scrubbing floors, little by little making my way up to the exalted position of office boy or bellboy. All this despite having a high school diploma and being able to speak the language ... And I was even an American citizen."

— Sergio Giral[5]

"I was remembering that the majority of black filmmakers in the United States used to speak of making black films. It's a concept which I am unable to handle ... It's just not part of our mentality. I don't want you to think that I am taking a demagogical stance, or anything of the sort, but not even I, as a black man, can conceive of a 'black' filmmaker or a 'black' film. It is because the practical activity of the revolution makes it impossible for us to conceive of the question of those categories. We have to retain the concept of race as an historical, social category, as a kind of individual trait like any other." — Sergio Giral[6]

As part of the "practical activity of the revolution," Sergio Giral made a documentary in 1967 interviewing the then 107-year-old escaped slave Esteban Montejo. During the long period of the Cuban Republic, 1902-1958, historiography had covered over and distorted slave history. In particular, slave rebellions and communities of runaway slaves or *palenques* were never discussed in the history books published during the Republic. Nor did historians acknowledge slave participation in the decades-long fight for independence from Spain (1869-1898), a participation, for example, which greatly disillusioned the then free Esteban Montejo about former slaves' prospects for a good life under democracy (he relates his war experiences in his *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*). [7] Lost forever, too, is any understanding of the social relations that existed in those first revolutionary Cuban communities, the *palenques*. As Giral points out,

"... any treatment of the *palenques* would have to be almost exclusively fictional because there is no extant written material of archeological evidence; nothing has survived to show us how the runaways lived.[8]

"And there was an incredible number of runaways in Cuba — sometimes possibly as many as a third to a half of the slaves had escaped and lived in the mountains." [9]

What did the bourgeois era use instead of an accurate history to tell the story of slavery? As the United States had *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Cuba had an abolitionist novel, *Francisco*, written in 1839. For a time *Francisco* was suppressed since it challenged Spanish colonial economic institutions. In that sense, the novel's history is quite different from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which in the form of theatrical roadshows toured all of northern United States, reaching even into the backwoods. Because of its official suppression, the novel *Francisco* was mainly circulated in manuscript among intellectuals. This novel was both the first novel in Cuba and written as a commissioned piece. It came out of a literary salon, which met in the 1830s at the house of a Cuban landholding aristocrat who wanted to promote social reform, Rodrigo del Monte. At del Monte's salon, the British ambassador to Cuba, Richard Madden, met national-born or "criollo" intellectual Anselmo Suarez y Romero,

son of slave-holding sugar planters who had gone bankrupt. Richard Madden needed an abolitionist novel to create pressure on Spain to abolish slavery and thus to promote British economic interests abroad: modernization, the introduction of British machinery, and the creation of new markets.

Francisco, Cuba's first novel, has a special importance in Cuban cultural history.^[10] *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* critiques that version of slavery as well as offers a cinematic recuperation of slave history. It looks at the conditions of slavery and how national attitudes toward slavery were shaped. It especially exposes the class origins of these attitudes. It differentiates the way intellectuals, landowners, and slaves looked at the same moment in Cuban history, the moment of slave rebellion.

This film, which Giral says in an understated way that he made as a "practical task of the revolution," has a complex cinematic structure. Giral has simultaneously created a history of slavery and critiqued from a class and historical perspective how people in Cuba were able to think about slavery. In our own time in the United States, a similar task would have been accomplished by the television serial based on Alex Haley's *Roots* if it had equally analyzed the class origins and function of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as life under slavery, that is, if television had given viewers tools to analyze the institutions and class nature of knowledge, especially the knowledge we receive through mainstream sources about the "oppressed."

EMOTION AND RATIONALITY

THE OTHER FRANCISCO has a unique style. In the image track of certain sequences, it depicts romantic love, lost love, rape, brutal beatings, and murders of slaves — principally images of individual villainy and individual tragedy. The film's emotional focus changes. It introduces and then in a concentrated way ends on images of solidarity among slaves. It moves from depicting their mutual oppression to showing their collective resistance and rebellion. The subject matter of repression and rebellion can be treated in an intensely emotional way, and this film does not reject emotion. But the sequences with a highly emotional comment are kept brief, often cut short, so that viewers do not become overwhelmed in pathos. And the film's whole structure comments on 19th century Romanticism.

A romantic mode of narration, which focuses on an individual couple's tragedy and a sexually frustrated landowner's villainy, had a specific social function in the novel *Francisco*. It repressed images of the slaves' rage and capacity for revolution. In the film's treatment of the novel, personal romantic imagery gives way to images of a more collectively generated emotion. We see the slaves' festival of destroying the masters' property and their effective personal and social release as many of them literally escape. The film locates emotion within a specific historical context and traces both what emotions a romantic novelist would attribute to slaves — and why — and what emotions we might more realistically assign slaves as we consider the specific conditions of their

bondage. The film does not back off from showing and using intensely emotional moments, particularly in the sequences depicting brutality, as a more symbolic style of Brechtian left filmmaking would do out of political principle (e.g., Godard and Gorin in their Dziga Vertov period, 1968-1972, rejected all "narcotic" aspects of cinematic identification).[\[11\]](#) THE OTHER FRANCISCO uses conventional visual connotation to draw viewers into its scenes.

The film opens as follows. We see the slave Francisco sitting on a rock by a stream in glistening sunlight, surrounded by blossoming trees. A beautiful, fairer-skinned black woman wearing earrings and dressed in white is shown in close-up. The two run to embrace. They meet in a clearing in the woods. She tells him tearfully that to save his life, she has become the master's concubine, that she "doesn't belong to him anymore," and that they shall never see each other again. We see her white figure in long shot running through the sun-dappled forest with its glistening leaves and then see Francisco in extreme long shot staggering in despair, running through a grove of tall, phallic-like trees and throwing himself on the ground, flailing at the leaves and dust with his fists. There is a cut to two white men riding through the forest, coming toward the camera, and looking up. Buzzards circle in the sky. The camera tilts and we see, with the riders in the background, first Francisco's hanged feet and then his whole rotting corpse.

The sound track in this sequence consisted of the forest sounds and the flowing river (heard at a louder than natural volume), the slaves' dialogue, and romantic orchestral music. We hear bells, harps, and violins in the music and later also drums. The drums and gourds are orchestrated in the film as a motif for slave culture, and later they "take over" the musical track.

At the point where we see the hanged man, a voice over announces, "This Negro was Francisco." The image track cuts to a literary salon where the young novelist Anselmo Suarez y Romero is seen reading his manuscript, with an appropriately doleful face. He speaks to an appreciative audience of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen standing around him who clap after he finishes with these words:

"The mulata was consumed little by little till many years later she died."

Then over that image track, another voice speaks; and for the rest of the film, the character Suarez y Romero's voice reading from the novel and this other male voice speak in voice over. The novelist's voice is "embodied" with occasional sync sound narration. The other voice is never "seen." It is also never qualified as it offers a class analysis of the novel and Cuban slave society. Both voices enter at strategic points. Both may shift the "action" to introduce another type of scene or comment on the scenes we have just watched; the latter voice also comments on what the novelist says. The film has no markers beyond voice quality to distinguish between voices over. Later, interviews form part of the fictional history. These are spoken with "educated" male

voices, also talking in a similar style. Only what I shall call from now on the "film's narrator," that voice never attached visually to a character, speaks an analysis which is unquestioned, the analysis of imperialism itself.

As I shall demonstrate later, the role of such a voice in a revolutionary film has a far different relation to the spectator than would an authoritative voice over in a U.S. documentary film, especially an educational film or one made for television. Partly this has to do with the relation of cultural institutions to the rest of Cuban society. It is this talkiness and the interplay of rather complex ideas, which are shown to be class defined in origin and goals, that make the film heavily didactic. And the unquestioned primacy of the film narrator's interpretation signals a fascinating difference from our own cinema, a difference that Teshome Gabriel refers to in defining Third Cinema.

The film narrators voice is first heard as we see Rodrigo del Montes literary salon. It asks,

"Or did the novel have within it another Francisco whom Anselmo Surez y Romero never got around to showing us?"

This is the first of that voices test questions which it poses throughout the film, questions that teach about the class origins of knowledge itself. Then, over a frozen image of the elegantly dressed house slave Francisco, a coachman standing by a carriage with a whip in his hand, come the film's titles.

After this prologue, the fiction moves to show slave oppression — partly through the novel's eyes. Young landowner Ricardo Mendizibal vengefully tortures Francisco because Francisco and Sra. Mendizibals personal maid, Dorotea, love each other. We learn that Francisco had been sent by Sra. Mendizibal from her house in the city to the plantation by her son Ricardo because the mistress had forbidden Francisco and Dorotea to marry and they had had an illegitimate child.

A long middle section presents sequences detailing acts of oppression. The figures who abuse the slaves are introduced — the overseers, the plantation doctor, the priest, and those slaves who act as the overseers captains to beat the other slaves. Intermittently come contrastive images of solidarity and slave resistance. In particular, after a long sequence filmed in lushly romantic imagery detailing the two house slaves' privileged condition and Francisco and Dorotea's love, we see an elegantly dressed Francisco, wearing a top hat, assisting his mistress into the coach along with the white-dressed Dorotea — both women wear lace mantillas. The romantic couple exchange love glances. The voice over, here the novelist, tells about Francisco's punishment before the slave himself knows of his mistress' intent. Then the image freezes on the gesture of the lovers holding each other's glance, significant in the narration because they cannot speak their love. In terms of general social oppression, the oppressed are forbidden a social voice. The film narrator enters over that image and points out the discrepancy between

what the novel, within a romantic framework, depicts as true love and what slave women, in fact, experienced.

The tone of the imagery shifts from showing lyrically filmed and elegantly costumed house slaves to extremely brutal but briefly held images of sexual brutality toward slave women. A woman sits on the same rock by the river where we had seen Francisco; she is raped by the overseer. Pregnant women must cut and carry cane, as must children. A child is run over in the fields by a cart; his mother drops her load of cane and runs to his fallen body. She screams with grief. In a longer sequence, a pregnant field hand dressed in rags, with her hair in pigtails, squats in the forest preparing a bitter, herbal potion, drinking it, and inducing an abortion. The film's narrator introduces this sequence:

"Infant mortality was often 100%. All human feelings were ruled out for slaves because of their condition. Women's repugnance about bringing up others to live in the same conditions of exploitation led them to avoid pregnancy."

As the woman in the forest provokes an abortion, we hear birds and a conch, one of the instruments of slave communication and slave music. As we saw Francisco writhing in the leaves in despair, so we see this woman writhing in dappled sunlight as she suffers the miscarriage totally alone. These images, heavily emotional ones, show slave women's condition. But the film does not let us inside slave women's consciousness as the novel lets us inside the minds and feelings of the aristocrats and the two house slaves. Romantic subjectivity and emotional life, according to the film, belong to the leisured class.

Following this narrative contrast about slavery and love, the film examines villainy. We see Ricardo teaching the rosary to kneeling slave children. From that spot he orders Francisco to be beaten and put in shackles. The novelist's voice over says that Ricardo hated Francisco because they both loved the same person: "But while Francisco had genuine and tender passion for her, Ricardo had only bastardized and offensive lust for the mulata." A long series of sequences depicts Ricardo's efforts to force himself on Dorotea and the increasingly brutal vengeance he takes against Francisco when she resists. The scenes become briefer and more violent, building in crescendo.

Contrasted here are the house's sunlit interior, with its painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe and big mirror in the bedroom, and the interior of the filthy dark infirmary where Dorotea finally sees Francisco stretched out on planks, dying from repeated lashings. It is at this point that Dorotea capitulates to Ricardo. This series of sequences about Ricardo's villainy ends on a freeze frame. We see an extreme close-up of Dorotea's tear-streamed face and crying eyes. Over that freeze frame, once again the narrator's voice challenges the novel's perspective: the viewer must look at something else, use another tactic to analyze slavery. "In the novel, Ricardo did what he did because he was moved by his passion, but was passion all that caused him to hurt Francisco and Dorotea?" A *hacendado* of those days would have had other motivations.

Subsequently the film introduces other male characters, the movers of slave society. As it depicts Ricardo's milieu, the film explicitly sets out the economic and social interests that traditional and modern *hacendados* of the time might have had — the interests of the British, the exporters of the machinery for sugar mills, and of the older Spanish colonials, who were reluctant to free slaves. Older and newer ideologies compete for the aristocrats' adherence. The priest, along with Ricardo's mother, does not want slaves to work on Sunday. Here, a conservative way of defending slaves' humanity says, "Save their souls." The priest preaches to the gathered slaves, "Your souls will fly to heaven after enduring this Calvary."

At Ricardo's lavishly appointed dinner an older aristocrat argues that to free the slaves would result in another Haiti, a realistic fear since the black population outnumbered the white. The younger landowners and the British diplomat, Richard Madden, argue that the new milling machines will need three shifts of labor and that it is more economical to free slaves and pay them a small wage to feed themselves than it is to drive ones slaves to death (importation of slaves was by then illegal, although landowners maneuvered around the law). Much information about slavery is presented through interviews as the British diplomat interviews Ricardo, the novelist, the overseer, and del Monte. Furthermore, the film repeats the images of the novelist's reception in del Monte's salon; here the film's narrator questions the *class interests* behind *Francisco's* origins.

Finally, narrative emphasis shifts to slave rebellion. Riders lead in an escaped slave, Crispin, whom we had seen earlier helping Francisco in the fields. Although he, like Francisco, is shackled, Crispin and several other slaves plan acts of sabotage and escape. They organize through the indigenous forms available to them — through gestures and glances while working, politicized religious rituals of African origin, burning the fields, and finally killing the traitorous slave captains and the overseer, sacking the plantation, and — for some — running away to escape.

In the film's conclusion, once again Francisco runs through the woods and throws himself on the ground, flailing with his arms. The film's narrator asks if a slave would have committed suicide, above all, for love, if other forms of slave rebellion existed. The sound track now uses other emotional elements; we hear drums, cries and African dialect as we see the slaves burning the cane fields and plantation buildings. They collectively kill the slave captain, who had beaten his fellow slaves. The momentarily free slaves sack the landholding family's possessions in an orgy of passionate rebellion, the festival of the oppressed. Over these scenes of "riot," the film's narrator lists many slave rebellions that actually took place both before and after *Francisco* was written; these were the slave rebellions that the ascendant bourgeoisie in the republic never acknowledged.

The final images of this uprising seal the films comment on the iconography of sexuality and romantic love. The field hand who had

provoked an abortion seizes a white dress from a trunk in the big house and puts it on, dancing among the other jubilant slaves. The overseer's assistant and other whites ride in and murder everyone who had not run to the mountains. A brief shot shows Francisco's corpse hanged in a burnt-out shed alongside that of this woman slave, dressed in white (presumably Dorotea was in the city with Sra. Mendizibal). The house slave's passivity had kept him from running off to the *palenques*, and the woman field hand had always been subject to a brutality which the maid in the big house would not likely experience.

This whole section of slave rebellion is shot with a mobile camera; we also see many figures moving in and out of frame. It's as if the camera joined the people. Images of masses of escaped slaves, all men, running through the forest, are accompanied by the sounds of cries, chants, and drums. Finally the men stand looking down from a mountain onto a broad vista below, and a brief title rolls over that image telling how the Cuban revolution has broken all color barriers. The film fades to white while we still hear the sounds of the chants and drums.

In its emotional trajectory, the film moves from emphasizing passion to oppression to collective resistance. Such images of passion, oppression, and collective resistance occur at various points throughout the film and implicitly comment on each other. Furthermore, the verbal narration, repetition of key sequences, and emotional shifts in music and sound effects clue viewers how to interpret those kinds of images. Although the sound track is generally didactic and expository, the image track shifts in emotional emphasis and we are constantly invited to consider it from yet another perspective. In a sense, beyond instructing viewers about the conditions of slavery and the novel *Francisco*, the film offers instruction on narrative fictional films tactics of characterization.

ICONOGRAPHY

"Analytically, a connotation is determined by two spaces: a sequential space, a series of orders, a space subject to the successivity of sentences, in which meaning proliferates by layering; and an agglomerative space, certain areas of the text correlating with other meanings outside the material text and, with them, forming a 'nebulae' of signifieds."

— Roland Barthes[\[12\]](#)

"'Feeling' is a group phenomenon which tends to consider itself 'generally human'; although it derives from a group, it cannot recognize itself as from the group." — Bertolt

Brecht[\[13\]](#)

"As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production." — Karl Marx and Friedrich

Engels[\[14\]](#)

Fictional feature filmmaking, what has been called classical narrative cinema, assigns its characters clearly recognizable traits that are immediately readable by viewers. The major characters gain traits by accumulation, so that any major change in how we "read" those characters marks a movement of the plot. The plot's resolution depends on the viewers sense of "knowing," even "finally knowing" what to think about the protagonists and the villains. Minor characters in classical narrative cinema change much less and are more likely stereotypes.^[15] THE OTHER FRANCISCO also assigns its characters easily readable traits. But here those traits explicitly signal that characters class position, relation to production, and level of social consciousness or false consciousness. THE OTHER FRANCISCO does not reject narrative cinema's "emotional finger pointing," a convention used to shape how audiences will receive a given character. But the Cuban film expands on that emotional finger pointing, or assignation of over-coded and obvious attributes to characters, to examine the social and especially the economic forces shaping characters' feelings and thoughts.

Sometimes the film relates incidents about the landowners' petit bourgeois cohorts to illustrate these groups' ideological support for the status quo and their economic role as the direct oppressors of the slaves. In this latter role, the film presents minor characters complexly. In particular, it shows them often acting sexually sadistically, thus linking sexual abuse and an aggressive assertion of power. The plantation physician treats Francisco's lashes with purgatives; the priest wants to save the slaves from damnation, which they would fall into because of their "onanism, promiscuity, and sodomy"; the overseer boasts to Ricardo that he smeared Francisco's lashes with the "usual poultice of urine, salt, rum, and tobacco." When he sits drinking at night with his assistant, the overseer brags, "When it comes to the whip, they all turn over and beg, 'Don Antonio,'" like fawning women, as he indicates with gestures.

Since the film takes pains to delineate the minor characters within a social context, the class limitations on their thinking is effectively shown. This is especially true of Sra. Mendizibal, whose hands speak for her. She goes to the plantation infirmary to donate leftover food, but the physician must lead her quickly out when she almost vomits and puts her handkerchief to her face to ward off the stench. She wrings her white lace handkerchief when Francisco asks for permission to marry; we understand that she intends to put him off indefinitely. When she visits the plantation to "forgive" the house slaves and finally permit them to marry, she hears and believes Ricardo's lies about Francisco's malice. In this sequence we see her passing among the slaves, who kiss her extended hand and say, "Your blessing, my mistress." She taps a small bird cage with her fan when she praises Dorotea's docility to Ricardo; her words become his cue to attack the maid. Sra. Mendizibal's hand is kissed by Richard Madden at the literary salon. Finally, as she leaves the plantation, she knows Ricardo will work the slaves to death — the matter is in his hands as she returns to genteel life in Havana. Her hand

gestures are futile in terms of her own class, but they have effective power over slaves' lives. The token kisses that aristocratic men give her hands and the required ones which slaves, and especially Dorotea, must give those hands indicate both her power as an aristocrat and her relative ineffectiveness as a woman. In particular, her hand gestures reveal the huge gap between her life of ease and that of the pregnant field hands.

Francisco and Ricardo are assigned a more complex set of traits. Francisco acts with mildness and resignation — false consciousness when looked at within the context of the field hands' rebelliousness. Francisco makes mistakes, lacks judgment and courage, and is the victim of Ricardo's and the overseer's particular wrath. All of this the film shows as due to his somewhat higher class status as house-related coachman. Perhaps Giral drew some of Francisco's iconography from Esteban Montejo's memoirs:

"[The drivers] were the dandies of the colored people ... If a boy was pretty and lively, he was sent inside to the masters house and there they started softening him up ..." [\[16\]](#)

Francisco is seen as "presumptuous" for loving Dorotea and fathering her child. He offends both the mistress and her son. Yet his socialization into gentility does not allow him to vent his rage, even though he shares the fate of death along with more rebellious slaves.

Ricardo's characterization is flat. He is established by his bloneness, palomino horse, and luxurious home. He shares with the all-too-willing overseer the desire to brutalize Francisco, as he tells the overseer that Francisco "gave the Señora's maid a big belly after the Señora had raised him like a son."

Francisco and Ricardo's related positions within a sexual triangle, as well as the differences in their social and physical existence, can be traced in this succession of images which follow Ricardo's attacking Dorotea. Ricardo attacks Dorotea as she is making up the mistress's bed. He rips open her bodice and slaps her as she stands below a portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Dorotea's dark hair falls down loose around her head. Ricardo threatens angrily, "I can do with him what I please, and I please to destroy him bit by bit until you give in or he dies." Then he hits and throws Dorotea to the floor.

The next shot cuts to Ricardo on his palomino horse galloping through the fields. As the horse runs off toward the mill, visible is a crupper around its tail. A kind of vaguely sexual image about aristocratic male power is represented by the horse's bloneness, the saddlery, and the animal's galloping haunches. A slave had sabotaged the mill with a file; Ricardo takes the occasion to accuse Francisco. Following is a series of sequences showing Francisco beaten. The first, shot from a very low angle, emphasizes the bareness of Francisco's back and that of the slaves who hold him down in the woods as the overseer beats him. His bare back becomes more and more scarred as we see him beaten more times.

Finally Dorotea sees him dying in the infirmary, which provokes her to give in to Ricardo. At the point that Dorotea goes back to Ricardo's room, the scene opens on Ricardo's bare back as he stands in a white-walled sunny environment washing himself from a silver bowl with water from a silver pitcher. Bareness here connotes Ricardo's class privileges: cleanliness and sexual right of access. In contrast, Francisco's bare back connotes only the lashes that he receives and Dorotea's understanding that unless she denies her sexual integrity, the man she considers her husband will be beaten until dead. Francisco's and Ricardo's bodies are presented in this series of scenes as parallel cases from very different social groups.

The only instance where *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* cannot overcome traditional cinematic iconography to make a social point is in the depiction of Dorotea. She is a "beautiful woman" in the traditional cinematic sense and she acts out a traditional melodramatic motive, to save her man. Her labor or that if any of the other slave women in the domestic sphere is not delineated. It seems as if domestic life among the slaves did not exist. The film manipulates Dorotea's figure far more for pathos and far closer to the novel *Francisco's* tragically romantic version of slave life than it does any other character. In particular, in a late sequence in the film, shots of mechanical failure or sabotage at the mill are intercut with shots of Ricardo's raping Dorotea while the Senora is away. Here the shots of the two people's twisted thighs provide only a conventional voyeuristic depiction of sexual intercourse; they do not convey the social situation of rape.

Although *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* generally examines the class nature of the characters' assigned traits, the established photographic conventions for treating female beauty are so stubborn to overcome, Dorotea's image rarely moves beyond those conventions. The film's only recourse is to set up the contrast of the pregnant field hand in pigtails and rags who induces an abortion and is later hanged next to Francisco. Freezing the image on an extreme close-up of Dorotea's face with tears in her eyes as Ricardo is taking her conveys more information about beauty and pathos than it does about women's anger at rape. What the film fails to do here is what it does do in the rest of the film as it deals with issues of men's lives: to delineate the economic and material *structures* of slave women's lives, especially their social relations and daily lives.

Giral's failure here is both aesthetic and political. Politically he has not sufficiently analyzed women's roles under slavery. He sees women slaves mainly in terms of sexual abuse and forced labor, not as organizers of slave resistance. As Angela Davis writes, the slave woman in her role in the domestic sphere, in the slave quarters,

"... performed the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor ... Precisely through performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially

conditioned inferiority of women, the black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men. Even as she was suffering under her unique oppression as female, she was thrust by force of circumstances into the center of the slave community. She was ... essential to the *survival* of the community."[\[17\]](#)

As Davis points out, "as the center of domestic life, the only life at all removed from the arena of exploitation," the slave woman was "the custodian of a house of resistance." The women in the quarters heard about and aided the runaways, if not runaways themselves. Escapes were planned in domestic space. Furthermore, in the history of slavery, specific acts of resistance are attributable to slave women. House servants, for example, often poisoned their masters' food or set fire to their masters' houses. Certainly the rapes that black women experienced and often fought against were impelled by the men's need to reduce the woman from social person to the level of an animal. It is a need to assert *power* aggressively that motivates the rapist's lust.

THE OTHER FRANCISCO cannot develop Dorotea as a social person partly because it uses and cannot overcome conventional cinematic iconography for depicting the romantic heroine, an iconography which the film does not sufficiently critique.

In contrast to Francisco and Dorotea, who are victims, other slaves are shown as effective actors within history, as agents. However, the film does not foreground them as individuals or clear-cut "characters," with few exceptions. One man, Andrés Lucumí harangues the gathered slaves as they dance to the rhythm of a spiritualist ritual by the slaves' bonfire. He preaches that all tribes from Africa here are united by the machete, which cuts the master's head as well as cane. As Dennis West writes, he

"incarnates both individual and class. Andrés Lucumí's first name is that of a specific person while 'Lucumí' indicates his Nigerian origin, following the Cuban slave custom of converting the designation of the blacks' African nation into a surname."[\[18\]](#)

The slaves act collectively. Visually their actions advance the narrative by what Bertold Brecht calls *gestus*: gestures or attitudes which reveal the whole web of social relations in which the character is enmeshed. The *gestus* demonstrates a character's social attitudes, which are often complex or contradictory. It isolates and singles out some one aspect of people's interactions so that that aspect can be foregrounded and seen in a new light.

The minimalization of the *gestus*, conveying the whole social gist in a small detail, becomes particularly appropriate in THE OTHER FRANCISCO for depicting slave communication. Often open conversation was forbidden or dangerous. Thus work songs express resistance. When Francisco starts working in the cane, we hear sounds

of chopping cane and the slaves chant, "Give a hand. We are all brothers." A slave looks at Francisco and shakes his head in compassion. He and another slave exchange glances and then the second man moves in to help Francisco cut cane. The glances, combined with the song, indicate the social relations and web of mutual assistance among the slaves. The same kind of exchange of glances occurs when the slaves pass along a metal file while working (Francisco won't use it). When they dance at night, some signal each other to run away. One man, Crispin, looks at Francisco, who shakes his head and looks down. In response, Crispin looks disappointed, even angry. It's a gestus about the solidarity extended to Francisco and his unwillingness to try to escape. Furthermore, the slaves are characterized collectively by their group activities of working, dancing, and politicizing their spiritualist rituals. Collectively, too, drums and chants "speak" for the group. The slaves all wear the same kind of rags.

Characterization of slaves as individuals belongs only to the novel; thus we see the house servants, the novel's protagonists, in privileged modes of dress. The field hands feel collectively, too — feel the emotions of grief, released rage, and escape.[\[19\]](#) The film critiques Romanticism and its ideologies of individualism and the "inner life." It does this especially through differences in how it delineates the lovers and aristocrats and how it delineates the slaves.

(Continued on [next page](#))

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Other Francisco, page 2

by Julia Lesage

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RICHARD MADDEN: MERCANTILE CAPITALIST RATIONALISM

At times narrative tension is fully interrupted by long interviews, which the character Richard Madden conducts with other characters. These interviews are part of the narration in the way that the film narrator's questions and comments are not. As a diplomat Madden wants to know about slave conditions at that historical time; the characters respond "within character." We would hardly have heard these opinions had the film's narration of a love story been more linear. In that sense, these interviews make the film Brechtian. They interrupt a single style of characterization and allow different modes of presenting information.

Brecht wanted to expand the scope of spectators' curiosity. One tactic he advocated was to have tension be broken by summaries, so people could use these to check back on what went on before, as readers do with "footnotes." He said the story should develop by curves and jumps and that each scene should stand for itself, with its elements kept distinctly separate. One scene should not make another nor depend on an inevitable succession of events. Rather, scenes should be juxtaposed, the drama often switching drastically in tone and subject matter from one scene to the next. Sometimes Brecht used placards or slides, which presented details that referred to the historical moment or showed relations between the action and the world. In Brecht's plays, the distancing effects worked on several levels — distancing between realistic details and schematized history, between the scenes themselves (each one being neatly separated from the other), between the show and the spectators, and between human nature represented and human nature seen as a certain historical state. Brecht hoped to stimulate audiences to analyze phenomena critically, which they had previously absorbed in an unreflective, socially conditioned way. Breaking up the narrative like this, he thought, should keep spectators from becoming caught up inside a linearly developed emotional experience, which swept them to catharsis. People should not immerse themselves inside a representation without asking how representations are constructed and how they affect us. Brecht advocated juxtapositions, jumps, and switches in tone so as to provoke spectators to stop identifying with

characters, which has been one of fiction's main pleasures. He wanted audiences to consider the fiction's source, which is the world itself, in a critical, contradictory, and detached way.

In *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* Richard Madden and his interviews provide Brechtian-style detachment. Madden is the rationalist, promoting an expanding mercantile capitalism. In real life, Richard Madden published a book on Cuba after he returned to England. Beyond that, he used the novel *Francisco* to document his investigation into Cuban slavery. The statistics which the film character Madden elicits about slavery were taken by Giral either from the real-life Madden's book or more likely from a contemporary Cuban study about the relation of mode of production to slave conditions in the sugar mills, *The Sugarmill* by Manuel Moreno Fragonales.[\[20\]](#)

The film's character Richard Madden parallels another cinematic villain, one developed as a romantic antihero in Gillo Pontecorvo's *BURN!*[\[21\]](#) Pontecorvo's tactic of placing the skilled and attractive Marlon Brando in the role of the imperialist William Walker finally undercuts the film's political analysis. As Joan Mellen points out, *BURN!*'s drama hinges as much on the pathos of Walker's story as it does on the depiction of oppression.[\[22\]](#) In contrast, in *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* Giral uses Madden only to represent a certain locus of power, a privileged access to information, and an advanced ideological position. *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* stands as a cinematic response to *BURN!* and counters *BURN!*'s mode of narration and characterization. The information in Madden's interviews is what is essential in *THE OTHER FRANCISCO*, not the "feelings" of the man.

In the sequence where a group of men are visiting Ricardo's plantation to see his new milling machine and have dinner, the priest blesses the mill with holy water. The film's narrator presents a key point:

"The machine speeds up production and makes the slaves' condition much worse. The basic relations between owner and slave are fundamentally those of production."

At the banquet, the younger aristocrats put forth the main arguments for abolition but not on humanitarian grounds.

"If we have machines we need more slaves to work them, two or three times as many."

"And slaves try to get out of work by breaking things."

"The English made workers out of ex-slaves and do not have to care for their upkeep. You pay them a low wage and they have to take care of themselves. All the profits of mechanization go to you."

Following that sequence we see a repeated version of Francisco's suicide. The film's narrator questions the accuracy of thinking

Francisco's motive was love. The film cuts to an interview between the blonde Madden and the young dark-haired Suarez y Romero in elegant surroundings. First, we discover that the novelist's family had lost their plantation to creditors. But the novelist had gone back to the old farm home with his family to write because he had personal economic difficulties. He said that is how he documented slave abuse. He reveals his unconscious role as petit bourgeois male intellectual, for he admits that Francisco does not realistically represent someone oppressed but rather someone "tame and peaceful." Suarez y Romero says,

"Since I too have patiently suffered misfortune, I put myself in Francisco's place, endowing him with that mildness and Christian resignation so hard to find in slavery."

At various moments in the film we see a high angle shot of Ricardo's plantation, the structure of which Giral learned from Moreno Fragonale's *The Sugarmill*.^[23] Giral himself had studied agricultural engineering in Cuba before joining the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC). His interest in slave economy and its shift to mercantile economy is borne out in the kinds of information he uses the character Madden's interviews to reveal.

For example, playing chess with Domingo del Monte, Madden hears about the illegal slave trade, the cost of slaves, the percentage of slave population to total population, and the whites' fear of slave rebellion. The liberal landowner del Monte suggests that Cuba "let slavery disappear gradually" as it seeks independence from Spain, not abolish slavery. The bourgeois novel *Francisco* repressed images of slaves' rage and freedom, just as the novelist's patron here advised the not-yet-born Cuban government to do.^[24]

Madden interviews the overseer in the overseer's house, a building with a straw roof where a black woman stands holding what is probably the overseer's child. The fact that Madden wishes to visit and interview this man sets Madden apart from the other aristocrats. As an agent of the British government, Madden understands that Spain has used whites' fear of freed slaves to stave off national revolution. It is in England's interest, therefore, to expose in Europe the cruelties of Spanish slavery so as to make room for British exports and to wean the Cuban aristocrats from Spain. He conducts these interviews so as to publish them abroad. His "larger" view as the proponent of a more advanced mechanical mode of production makes him take seriously a man like the overseer, who is responsible for production. From the overseer, Madden elicits facts about slave conditions. Slaves have been pushed to feed a constant supply of cane to the inexhaustible machines. They get only four hours of sleep a night and are forced to work too much, until a great percentage of them die. Madden points out the folly of keeping slaves in stocks when they could be working or of pushing them past human endurance. But the overseer only says he does what he is paid to do.

The film's narrator supersedes the points of view elicited by Madden, for the emotional and political conclusion of the film is about slave

rebellion. Over images of collectively expressed emotion, looting and celebrating and running and escape, the narrator's voice lists Cuba's slave rebellions. The list has emotional force because it comes when we, the audience, have already been given an analysis and a fictional experience to weigh what that list means. In a sense, it is dryly rational but it is read over images of rage, drunkenness, and lease — and of the corresponding violence on the part of whites in response.^[25] The film has shown the brutal rationality of imperialist expansion moving in on a feudally organized, colonial slave economy. The brutality is embodied in Ricardo and the overseer, the rationality in del Monte and Madden. Now the film concludes with a vision of revolutionary rationalism. The list is no longer just a list. It recuperates national culture and does so in a feature film, which itself is a form that must be "recuperated" or taken over in a new way. In *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* priority becomes placed on creating knowledge, particularly knowledge about those groups historically *oppressed*.

REVOLUTIONARY CULTURE

"Our whole population has been turned into a university."
— Lea Guido, Minister of Health, Nicaragua

Cuba and Nicaragua undertook literacy campaigns immediately after their revolutions. Those campaigns have a cultural significance for the Third World that goes beyond teaching people to read and write. Creating literacy in Cuba and Nicaragua has increased people's desire to know and interact with their own social reality, so the literacy campaigns have also created mass consciousness about how and why information becomes distorted and deformed.

As much as urban dwellers in Latin America have been surrounded by capitalist mass culture, the mass media in Latin America generally coexist with mass illiteracy. In such a case, television and film offer the only available, but an ideologically selective and grossly distorting, "window on the world." In these pre-revolutionary Third World cultures, large sectors of national culture remain invisible and an accurate national history has never been taught. As Eduardo Galeano writes in his analysis of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign:

"The histories of all our countries are shown to us as marginal notes on the pages of the rest; the native insurrections and the revolts of black slaves are mentioned in passing, when they are mentioned at all, as episodes of bad conduct; the great economic and social processes do not even exist as backdrops ... In the duel of good and evil, the masses passively play the role of extras ... The incident of Palmares, in which black slaves lived freely throughout the whole of the 17th century, defeating successive Portuguese and Dutch military expeditions, merits a best a couple of lines in the history books of Brazil."^[26]

Coinciding With Cuba and Nicaragua's literacy campaigns was the

brigadistas' (the literary teachers') growth. Going out into remote rural areas young women *brigadistas* broke traditions about feminine roles and entered actively into political life. In this experience, the *brigadistas* learned about ways of life no one in the dominant cultural sphere had previously acknowledged. The literacy campaigns let the country learn about itself. And the *brigadistas* learned how intellect — theirs and the people's they worked with — blossomed with the desire to build a new way of life. As a group of young women *brigadistas* discussed women's roles in a seminar preparing them for Nicaragua's literary campaign (their literacy text, built on Paulo Freire's method, had a section on women):

"It has only been possible within a revolution for women here to develop themselves intellectually and physically. The revolution is what liberates us." [\[27\]](#)

Growing intellectually, changing one's own and others' social attitudes, and transforming the country characterize a Cuban's or Nicaraguan's active participation in "cultural" revolution. What is properly cultural spills over into other areas. In Nicaragua, for example, two years of the revolution have seen many diseases eradicated principally through mass participation and mass education. Managua's daily papers carry entomological reports about pests threatening the crops. Plagues of wholly new diseases, suspected to be U.S.-induced bacteriological warfare, are combated by mass education, so that in every workplace can be seen posters that teach people how to deal with an epidemic of otherwise incurable bloody conjunctivitis.

In Cuba and Nicaragua, that is, inside left revolutionary culture in Latin America, discourse has changed. The class nature of "educated" discourse has shifted so that educated discourse and popular discourse are more nearly coterminous. Education is now an ongoing process among people of all ages, conducted through new forms. At work, in work councils, and in the neighborhoods, through block committees, people whose voice previously carried no weight now expect to express criticisms that are acted upon and to receive all the information they need to be effective social agents. Film showings in Cuba take place as well in these mass organizations and generate an informed, popular criticism of the mass media. In Nicaragua, Managuans regularly listen to radio news for an hour in the morning before going to work and to television news at night for an hour; many people read three newspapers a day as well, including the conservative *La Prensa*. As a Sandinista banker put it to me, "You've gotta know what the enemy is up to," [\[28\]](#) which characterizes the attitude of people in the Third World who understand the threat of U.S. intervention, both covert and through force of arms.

This new, revolutionary discourse is one of information, analysis, and action. The "news" often impels people in Cuba and Nicaragua to act. The mass media speak an enabling and capacitating voice. The media help create an articulate population and they also articulate the people's

concerns. And this enabling process of intellectual analysis, developed partly through mass media, reaches into geographically remote areas neglected by all cultural and educational institutions in the past. An accountant and former war hero, Rosario Rivera, describes this combination of intellectual, personal, and social change in the small Nicaraguan village she came from,

"My aunts and cousins in the countryside have become very active in the revolution. They're doing things they've never done before. They stand up and make speeches. They talk about themselves and say they should no longer be marginalized but should work alongside men as equals."[\[29\]](#)

It is in this context of providing a capacitating voice that *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* functions. It uses some tactics of Brechtian distancing, in a way very close to Brecht's aesthetic and political concerns, but it also uses the emotions of the spectacle to represent the uprising of the oppressed. In terms of cinematic predecessors, in its voice-over narration and use of music, *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* reflects cinematic innovations introduced by Santiago Alvarez in Cuban newsreels.

Alvarez, working in a line from the Russian documentarist Dziga Vertov, emphasizes that a newsreel must not become stale with the passage of days.[\[30\]](#) Partly this politicized aesthetic derives from ICAIC's limited resources and partly from the delay in distributing the weekly filmed news to all areas of the country. But Alvarez has also developed a style that has a political base: he understands how capitalist media's way of presenting social information also induces forgetfulness and impotence. People need an analysis that lets them connect information on their social reality and to remember and use that connection. Characteristically, Alvarez's newsreels, especially his early ones, provide this analysis through an emotionally coded use of indigenous music and a voice-over narration or intertitles. In *THE OTHER FRANCISCO*, the voice over analyzes the novel *Francisco*, the repression of information about slave rebellions, and the relation of abolition to Europe's expanding mercantile capitalism. However, *THE OTHER FRANCISCO*'s analysis can also be applied by spectators to contemporary cinema and television — to the news and to Hollywood cinema's frequent reduction of stories of class oppression to stories about tragic love. The film does not just effect this operation rationally. It uses music and emotion to achieve these ends.

Giral's advisor on *THE OTHER FRANCISCO*, Tomás Gutierrez Alea, has written that film should have a concrete goal — it should be a factor in viewers' social, emotional, and cognitive development. If we compare *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* to its contemporary U.S. counterpart, the television serial *Roots*, a clear difference emerges between bourgeois and revolutionary media forms. In its form, *THE OTHER FRANCISCO* presupposes the spectators' need and willingness to experience more than pathos and more than just "being informed." It takes as reality race

and class, and the consequent social formation of people's emotions, here the characters' emotions. It accepts the revolutionary responsibility of creating history, and it does so within the context of imperialism and revolution. THE OTHER FRANCISCO assumes that viewers have a collective need to recover their lost past, particularly that past lost through racism. It's a film in which the action does not stop with the action of watching it. It makes an implicit demand that its tactics of analysis be applied to other sources of knowledge. It combines a popular media form — the ninety-minute fictional film — with an historical examination of epistemology. It is, as Diderot advocated, a new form of *utile dulce*.

Cuban film stands in a new relation to spectators because it is a film movement within a revolution. It represents a new way of thinking about and constructing the feature fiction film, what Cohn McCabe has previously called the "classic realist text."^[31] As Tomás Guterrez Alea writes in his study of film aesthetics, "The Viewer's Dialectic," ideally film should establish a tie between the viewers' desire for spectacle and the film's enabling or activating effect. As Alea writes about Cuban cinema's goals, he well understands how Cuban cinema, especially a film like THE OTHER FRANCISCO, stands as a model for the rest of Third Cinema, for the pleasure of learning is an integral part of Third Cinema's goals. Alea describes this new model of fictional film and its relation to the spectator as follows:

"Film will be most fruitful insofar as it impels viewers toward a more profound understanding of reality and, as a result, insofar as it helps them live more actively and incites them to cease being mere spectators in the face of reality. To do that we ought to appeal not only to emotion and feeling but to reason and intellect. In this case, both moments ought to coexist irrevocably united, in such a manner that they reach those heights, as Pascal put it, of provoking authentic 'shudderings and tremblings' of the mind."^[32]

Notes

^{1.} Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965).

^{2.} Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 1.

^{3.} This issue is taken up in the series of articles, "Toward a New Information Order," *NACLA: Report on the Americas* 16, no. 4 (July-August 1982).

^{4.} Significantly, some of the most Brechtian Cuban films have been made by Tomás Gutierrez Alea and two young black directors whose projects he supervised, Giral and Sara Gomez. See my article on Sara Gomez's ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, "Dialectical, Revolutionary, Feminist," *JUMP CUT* no. 20 (May 1979).

5. Sergio Giral, "The Cuban Cinema and the Afro-Cuban Heritage," interview conducted by Julianne Burton and Gary Crowdus, *The Black Scholar* (Summer 1977): 64.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
7. Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, ed. Miguel Barnet, trans. Jocasta Innes (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1973).
8. Giral p. 69.
9. *Ibid.*
10. "THE OTHER FRANCISCO: Film Lessons on Novel Reading," *Ideologies and Literature* 1, no. 5 (January-February 1973).
11. Julia Lesage, *The Film Career of Jean-Luc Godard: References and Resources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979) and "The Films of Jean-Luc Godard and Their Use of Brechtian Dramatic Theory" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1976).
12. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), p. 8.
13. Bertold Brecht, "Thesen über die Aufgabe der Einfühlung in den theatralischen Künsten," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 15, ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 246. Translation mine.
14. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.V. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1973).
15. In general, as characters, elderly people, lesbians, and people of color are relegated to these minor, stereotyped, and easily "readable" roles.
16. Montejo, pp. 19, 21.
17. Angela Davis, "The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* (December 1971), p. 5. Italics Davis'.
18. Dennis West, "THE OTHER FRANCISCO," *Cineaste* 8, no. 2 (1977), 47.
19. See Frantz Fanon, "Concerning Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968).
20. West, p. 47; Manuel Moreno Fraginales, trans. Cedric Belfrage, *The Sugarmill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).
21. Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1849 obtained a concession from the Nicaraguan government for a canal and connecting river traffic. He was

turned against, in ruthless competition, by his associates Morgan and Garrison, who equipped William Walker as mercenary to get these concessions. Walker had fought in Mexico trying to annex the territory of Sonora to the United States. He arrived in Nicaragua in 1956, built up his forces, and in 1856 proclaimed himself president of Nicaragua, gaining the immediate recognition of the United States. He made English the official language and reinstated slavery. These data are from an article in a Nicaraguan newspaper, *El Nuevo Diario*, 15 November 1981: "Breve Historia Contemporanea de Nicaragua," by Sergio Ramirez Mercado.

[22.](#) Joan Mellen, "A Reassessment of Gillo Pontecorvo's BURN!" *Cinema* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1972-1973).

[23.](#) Giral, p. 68.

[24.](#) Fanon, "Concerning Violence."

[25.](#) *Ibid.*

[26.](#) Eduardo Galeano, "The Revolution as Revelation," *Socialist Review* 65 (September-October 1982): 15-16.

[27.](#) LA MUJER EN LA REVOLUCTION NICARAGÜENSE, 16mm color film, directed Adrian Carrasco (Mexico, 1980). Translation mine.

[28.](#) Manuel Erazo, personal communication, Managua, November 1981

[29.](#) Rosario Rivera, personal communication, Managua, November 1981. This interview forms part of the sound track of a videotape I am making on women and daily life in Nicaragua, in which the words are those of Nicaraguan women; also the interview with Rosario Rivera and others has been published in the Spring 1983 issue of the magazine *Voices of Nicaragua* (3411 W. Diversey, Chicago, IL 60647) in its special issue on women in Nicaragua, which I co-edited with Carole Issacs.

[30.](#) Santiago Alvarez, "The Cuban Newsreel," interview with Susan Fanshell, *A Decade of Cuban Documentary Film: 1972-1982*, catalog for film series, November-December 1982 (Young Filmmakers Foundation, 4 Rivington St., New York, NY 10002).

[31.](#) Tomás Gutierrez Alea, *Dialéctica del espectador*, Cuadernos Union (Havana: Union of Cuban Artists and Writers, 1982), p. 27. Translation mine. [This book is published in translation across three issues of JUMP CUT, with the third installment in No. 32. It is also available from the Center for Cuban Studies, New York.]

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Malou. In the Country of My Parents Cross-cultural examination

by Shawn S. Magee

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Jeanine Meerapfel is an outsider. As a woman in a patriarchal age, as a foreigner in a xenophobic country, as a direct descendant of a race nearly eradicated a generation ago by genocide, she stands apart from the mainstream of German society. Her concerns, however, are not recrimination or revenge, but careful examination of the past. Meerapfel, the daughter of German Jews who had fled Nazi Germany and subsequently settled in Argentina, has chosen film as her medium of redress.

Since 1964 when she came to Germany as a film student and studies at Ulm with Alexander Kluge, Meerapfel has been involved with film in a variety of capacities, including directing shorts, screenwriting, and criticism. Her first feature, *MALOU* (1980) and her documentary *IM LAND MEINER ELTERN (IN THE COUNTRY OF MY PARENTS)* (1981) provide her most penetrating insights into several controversies swirling through Germany today.

In the initial sequence of *MALOU*, the fear, "like mother, like daughter," haunts Hannah (Grischa Huber) as she sifts through a suitcase full of old photographs, knick-knacks, and mementos which tell the story of her mother's life. Hannah is both attracted to and aghast at the life her mother, Malou (Ingrid Caven) had led, a life which included a short-lived career in Strasbourg as a nightclub entertainer, conversion to Judaism, marriage to a prosperous German Jewish businessman (Ivan Desny), flight to Argentina only one step ahead of the Gestapo, and then drink, decay, and death in Buenos Aires.

Malou, a simple French woman from the countryside, took her identity purely as a function of the man she loved. She willingly subordinated everything, including her homeland, her religion, and her mother tongue, to her husband Paul's needs and desires. She lived her life through, rather than with him. When Paul left her for another woman, Malou became first frantic and then morose; her sense of self-worth was subsumed by her self-obliterating sense of devotion.

Living in present day Berlin, Hannah is still haunted by her mother's legacy. As a child growing up in Buenos Aires, she had observed, with increasingly limpid eyes, her mother's slow disintegration, the growing number of empty booze bottles, the steady procession of "uncles." Perhaps as an act of rebellion, Hannah opted for a conventionally successful marriage to a promising German architect, Martin (Helmut Griem). Years after her mother's death, and after more than a decade with Martin, Hannah is still disturbed by the dichotomy within her. She lives in mortal fear of traversing the fine line between marital commitment and subservience.

Hannah feels ambivalent about her relationship with Martin. She enjoys the love and security provided by her marriage, yet she also resents Martin's attempts (due to an overly zealous and typically Teutonic love of order and propriety) to rein her in. Meerapfel adroitly characterizes this conflict in a scene which begins with several shots of Hannah and Martin making love late in the afternoon. The atmosphere is warm and tender. Afterwards Martin whispers ruefully that they should get dressed for they are expected soon at a cocktail party given by Martin's boss. Hannah playfully refuses to let him go; initially Martin acquiesces, protesting only halfheartedly. Later he begins to insist. At the same time, Hannah escalates her silliness, thwarting his attempts to get dressed, clutching at his crotch as he tries to put on his pants. He is clearly irritated, but Hannah is equally adamant. Tension builds to a standoff. Finally Martin explodes, voicing his distaste for such childish behavior. They finish dressing in silence.

As Merrapfel's casting and costume decisions demonstrate, Hannah and Martin represent certain tenets of their respective cultures. Martin is the paragon of Aryan good looks — tall, blond, clean-shaven. He wears conservative clothing — coordinated corduroy suits, small plaids and checks, buttoned-down shirts. Yet he holds his square jaw with an air that is often impatiently taut, sometimes tinged with arrogance. We sense reserve, even aloofness, in his demeanor, characteristics often ascribed by outsiders to the German people as a whole. Martin is a representative, as well as a product of his culture.

Hannah, in keeping with her Jewish heritage, has dark, curly — sometimes unruly — hair and deep, sensuous eyes. That the eyes are situated above a very noticeable set of dark circles not only lends to exoticism to her appearance, but also indicate her current foundering. Her clothes-flowing, large-print skirts, pastel tank tops, and lace-up-the-leg sandals — reflect the open and relaxed Latin American culture of her childhood.

In addition to physical characteristics, Meerapfel also relies heavily on language to depict cultural conflict in *MALOU*. Genealogically, Hannah has many contradictions. She is half-French and half-German, daughter of a devout Catholic but raised in the Jewish tradition. Having spent her childhood in Spanish-speaking Buenos Aires, she now lives in German-speaking Berlin. Although the predominant language of the film is

German, there are several passages where the only language being spoken is French or Spanish, or occasionally Hebrew or Yiddish. (In the original German version, these passages are not subtitled. For viewers who are not conversant in these languages, the action is sufficient to maintain continuity.) Thus technique aurally underscores the myriad of cultural influences swirling around Hannah. The fact that she teaches Spanish for Germans and German for foreigners in an adult education program means that she is constantly straddling two languages, two cultures. She can rarely lapse comfortably into her mother tongue, except in the company of her few Argentine friends. Although she speaks, reasonably fluent German, she falters occasionally. Then she is quickly corrected by Martin, who points out condescendingly that a certain pronoun governs the dative case rather than the accusative.

The music in MALOU also reveals the cultural crosscurrents buffeting Hannah. Much of the music (composed by frequent Fassbinder collaborator, Peer Raben) is in the form of a tango-indigenous to Argentina — but here with a unique twist, German lyrics. In fact, Meerapfel herself compares the structure and rhythm of her film to that of a tango:

"During Filming in Madrid we heard an Argentinian singing tangos in a bar. It became clear to me that the sentimentality of the story in the film, this longing for the past, this melancholy mood, were feelings which I had learned or rediscovered in the tango."

Unlike much of the recent work emanating from Germany, MALOU is warm and intimate. The camerawork (by Michael Ballhaus) emphasizes the films essentially narrative tenor, the directors desire to see the characters up close rather than distancing them through a wash of colored filters, a highly stylized mise-en-scene, or a psycho-historical phantasmagoria.

After completing MALOU, Meerapfel made a second film on a similar subject, the problems of Jews living in contemporary Germany. The documentary, entitled IM LAND MEINER ELTERN (IN THE COUNTRY OF MY PARENTS) was commissioned by German television. The film begins with a shot of a peaceful Jewish cemetery in Bavaria as Meerapfel says in the voice-over:

"If Hitler had not existed, I would have been born a German Jew, more German than Jewish, in a small village in southern Germany ..."

Instead, she was born in Argentina, coming "back" to Germany nineteen years ago. IN THE COUNTRY OF MY PARENTS presents dialogues with Jews, several of them similarly repatriated and some personal friends of the director, discussing what it means to be a Jew in Berlin in the 1980s. The dialogues were usually filmed on just one take and incorporated into the film with only minor editing. The speeches are amazingly candid and often painfully touching. One sequence depicts a

young woman, Eva, recalling memories of her grandmother while wistfully fingering a frayed stack of old letters. The sequence was shot in the same apartment from which Eva's grandmother disappeared forty years ago. We hear not only about a young girl's attachment to her grandmother but also her profound guilt at having survived.

Another woman, Sarah, is a painter who has retreated into her coach-house apartment. Her inner life has become her only life — she feels alienated from the society surrounding her. She does not consider Germany "home" but cannot imagine another "home."

Hazel, filmed in the no-man's land separating East and West Berlin, says Jews may be hiding behind their Jewishness — there are worse lives than what Jews lead in Germany today, such as those that Turkish *Gastarbeiters* or immigrant workers have. Hazel does not usually think of herself as a Jew and only does so when forced to by others. An older couple originally from Odessa and a shoemaker from Latvia are grateful to have emigrated to Germany, land of the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* or "economic miracle. And an affluent young theatre producer admits sheepishly to being "embarrassed" by appearing on camera specifically as a Jew.

Frequently, the emotional intensity of the dialogues is overwhelming. To balance these moments, Meerapfel has included footage from her talks with ten-year old Anna, a bright, U.S.-born Jewish girl raised in Berlin where her father is a professor of history. Anna's openness and her affection for the German people — quite evident from her observation, "They're just like me — except that I'm American!" (which she announces proudly in flawless German) — stands in direct contrast to the adults' tentativeness. Although Anna can read the words on the cenotaph for the six million who perished, she comprehends very little of the horror they represent. Anna's innocence is her dominant characteristic and seems both refreshing and disquieting, as when Meerapfel shows Anna's skipping absentmindedly down a set of railroad tracks which led to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen.

Throughout most of the film is the haunting presence of the word *Angst*, usually translated as "anxiety" but more precisely connoting a latent, somehow intangible fear. Angst stalks the post-Holocaust generation of Jews in Germany. The German people as a whole have never come to terms with their collective guilt. Only now are German schoolchildren being taught about atrocities perpetrated in the name of Aryan supremacy. Only recently has television programming, such as HOLOCAUST and Meerapfel's IN THE COUNTRY OF MY PARENTS, been offered. The German people remain defensive on the subject of anti-Semitism, and many prefer simply to close their eyes and minds to the past.

Jeanine Meerapfel has deliberately chosen a non-confrontational tenor for her film, eschewing the "horror show" mentality so prevalent in other documentaries on the subject. We see none of the archival photographs depicting emaciated, glassy-eyed survivors of Auschwitz,

mountains of corpses, ovens. The film was made with German viewers in mind, with the expressed purpose of "... building a bridge, starting a dialogue." Meerapfel discussed her goals during our interview:

"I am concerned primarily with the present and how we all react to what happened in the past. That's why I wasn't interested in depicting all the heinous crimes that were committed. And the film was not intended as a vengeful attempt to arouse feelings of guilt. Guilt leads only to silence. I simply wanted to ask the questions: 'How did this happen?' 'Why did it happen?' 'How is it today?' and 'What can we do about the fact that many people's attitudes have actually changed very little?'"

IN THE LAND OF MY PARENTS was shown twice on German television. It received such a positive response that the station, unequipped to handle the numerous requests for prints, has since sold the film to an independent distributor in order to facilitate public access and demand.

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Interview with Heidi Genée

by Renate Fischetti

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Born in 1938 in Berlin, Heidi Genée was raised in the postwar city by a single mother. After secondary school, Genée entered her father's production company and was trained in all filmmaking skills, ranging from bookkeeping to camera work to directing. She eventually became a freelance editor and assistant director, first in Berlin and later in Munich, soon establishing herself as one of two top editors (the other being Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus) of the New German Cinema, working with the Schamoni brothers, Lilienthal, Brandner, Noelte, Sinkel, Brustellin, Bohm, Runge, Miehe, and Kluge.

In 1976, she made her debut as director with *GRETE MINDE*, earning a federal film prize but a lukewarm reception in the critical press. *1 + 1 = 3*, her second feature (1978/79), was a huge success, and was awarded the *Grand Prix des Ameriques* in Montreal, 1979, and the 1980 Lubitsch Prize. Genée is currently working on her fifth feature, *MÄDCHEN* (working title). In addition to directing, Heidi writes the scripts for her films and has been awarded several federal script grants. She lives and works in Munich where she also raises her three children, Ina, Kristin and Daniel, who have all starred in one or more of her films.

A recurring theme in the films of Heidi Genée is to depict women and children as real people with feelings and thoughts of their own, important enough to be in the forefront of cinematic action. In the process, male characters tend to fade, a fact about which Genée does not feel apologetic. She says she makes films for *all* people and if there is a slant, it is towards the movie-going younger public. She expects these young people to appreciate her novel point of view and implied humor.

Filmography

1976/77: *GRETE MINDE*. 102 minutes, 35mm, color. Distributor: United Artists. Not commercially distributed in the U.S., but available through the German Embassy/West Glen Films. The story of a proud and passionate young woman who has trouble adapting to 17th century Lutheran values in a small north German town and who turns rebel with

a childhood companion. After the death of her mate she asks for forgiveness, is not forgiven, and seeks revenge by setting the town on fire.

1978/79: *1 + 1 = 3*. 85 minutes, 35mm, color. Distributor: Filmwelt. Commercially distributed in the U.S. by Cinema 5. The story of a young actress who is determined to have her child despite the attempts of her boyfriend to have it aborted. A second boyfriend proves equally unworthy of accepting her and the child, and she sets out on a career totally her own.

1980: AUCH DER HERBST HAT SCHÖNE TAGE (EVEN AUTUMN HAS BEAUTIFUL DAYS) (short)

1980/81: DER STACHEL IM FLEISCH. 90 minutes, 35mm, color. Distributor: Filmwelt, Munich. Not distributed in the U.S. A marriage breaks up while the family is vacationing in Sardinia. The whole process is witnessed by a young boy, who in turn suffers very much and runs away.

1981/82: DIE KRAFTPROBE. 84 minutes, 35mm, color. Distributor: Filmwelt, Munich. Not distributed in the U.S. The story of a teenage girl who is left to herself while her mother is at an institution for drinking problems. The film tries to portray the child's emotions realistically.

1983/84: MÄDCHEN (working title). In progress.

Heidi Genée: I would like to make a comedy. It's just in my head. I always do a lot of thinking and then spend relatively little time writing. It'd be about a woman around forty who lives with her two children — a little girl about seven and a big one about 17 years old. The woman tries to find out where she stands with regard to men and to her profession but finally realizes that her own daughter has long caught up to her. It's still vague. I'll start the script next month and write it in four to five weeks. I can only write evenings when the children are in bed. That's the problem.

Renate Fischetti: How do you finance your films? For instance, do you start looking for money when you finish a script, or do you begin much earlier?

Genée: STACHEL IM FLEISCH is not out yet, so I don't know how it will be received. But I am still living off the reputation of my previous film, ONE PLUS ONE. The Film Project Office (*Filmörderungsanstalt*) gave me DM 900,000 for this film because of its box office sales. Half of that money went to my co-producer, my divorced husband, the other half to me. So I had around DM 400,000 to begin with. And then, when I finish the script, I can send it to the Interior Ministry and apply for a script grant (*Drehbuchprämie*), that's another DM 250,000; I have always gotten that so far, even though it's quite competitive; only 6 out of 60 scripts get it. Then when I decide how to put my crew together and how

much the whole film will cost, let's say 1.5 million Marks, then I'll approach a TV channel to co-produce it.

Fischetti: For what kind of audience do you make your films?

Genée: Actually, viewers between ages 17 and 28 constitute 90% of our audience. My films are for those who do not prefer STAR WARS, those who both want to be entertained and to discuss a film afterward. ONE PLUS ONE stirred a lot of discussion, and I myself took the film to 14 or 15 cities, traveling for nine months everywhere in Germany. Everyone had something to say about the film and at first they surprised me. They did not think about camera, directing, or actors; they just said, "I would have behaved this way in that situation, and my boyfriend would have done it that way." They looked at the film as a case study, which I came to recognize as an advantage, since the audience accepted the film just because they considered it that way. One man said he felt like was right in the middle of the film. Other men told me they heard themselves talk: "For heaven's sake, I always say that too."

It is a response I very much want to build into a film and find it also in my latest film, STACHEL IM FLEISCH. I have just shown this film to five or six people, who said it has so much that is familiar, and therefore meaningful, that people will think about it. But the film really is quite ordinary, with no unusual events; on the contrary, everyday things happen and are magnified. And if I make a film that helps people tackle difficult problems, as in STACHEL, then I am glad.

Fischetti: Do you work with a team?

Genée: Yes. It saves a lot of trouble. Let's say you are on your third film, and have, let's say, only two-thirds of your previous team, you have to spend a lot of time on interpersonal things. For example, I have resigned myself to my soundman occasionally losing his temper. We tend to overlook him, yet we get angry if the sound is not as good as it should be. He has the right to make himself heard, even if it means shouting, because I want good sound. I also know the strengths and weaknesses of the cameraman, and he also knows mine. This helps shorten the work process.

I have had different actors for each film. But I have done something special with each of the three films, which I recommend to other filmmakers. Long before the first day of shooting, I acquaint the actors with one another and I create a sort of family situation. When we were making ONE PLUS ONE, for example, my daughter once said that she had no idea we were shooting, even though the camera was there. Everyone was so familiar with one another and the costumes and the script, it was no big thing to start shooting. We created a very natural atmosphere in ONE PLUS ONE and nobody was tense.

I would plead for avoiding an impersonal atmosphere and getting everyone acquainted before the shoot. For example, when we made the last film in Sardinia, we were spread out over two hotels, but all the

actors stayed with me. We knew one another, all ate together, and talked about heaven knows what, but never about the film. As I know from my experience as an assistant director long ago, when you are on a shoot and have been filming for about 10 or 11 days, suddenly a lot of aggression surfaces, and you don't quite know how to handle it. You suddenly notice that an actor who always wants a close-up sort of edges his way into the foreground. Or another person gets attention through headaches. Or yet another one wants to be the last to have makeup put on or insists on sleeping longer. All these aggressions create a handicap in a shoot. If you have such a bad atmosphere, nothing will come of it.

I try to deal with all this before we start shooting so everyone can check everyone else out and discover the weaknesses and other traits we don't normally like. You can say to yourself, I like this person more and the other one less, and by the time the shoot comes along, this gets worked out.

STACHEL IM FLEISCH was quite a strain in Sardinia with temperatures of 104°. Physically it was tough, but it was the most beautiful shoot I have ever been on. I had told everyone to bring their families so we had a job organizing everything. The producer wanted to kill me since he had to provide for grandmothers, grandchildren, dogs, and what have you. The crew brought everyone; I brought my three children, too. The producer spent all his time finding lodgings. It was crazy, yet we shot in five weeks and not in six, as is normally done. So the crew had a week of fun with their families swimming. And the film benefited.

Fischetti: ONE PLUS ONE was a great critical success, getting several awards. Was it also a box office success?

Genée: You choose to work for good reviews, awards, or big audiences. In the case of ONE PLUS ONE all three things happened, which is rare. For GRETE MINDE I also got a Federal Film Prize, but more bad than good reviews. It was my first film, an adaptation of a Fontane story, just at the time when critics were beginning to frown on historical films and campaign in all the papers for original stories. Now I think they were right, and that I was somewhat of a coward. GRETE MINDE is a period piece, which keeps you at a distance from the things that go on on the screen.

ONE PLUS ONE was different. It's actually the story of my mother, who had me against everybody's wishes. People said of GRETE MINDE, "Well, why don't you shoot the same subject in the Bavarian Forest?" Later I saw their point. Young people actually stayed away from this film, only older people went to see it, say those above 35, 10% of whom still go to movies. To make a film for this type of audience is a little too costly, especially if you spend two and a half million Marks to recreate sets of the 16th and 17th centuries. Set dressing was our magic word. We could never set up the camera and just shoot but first we would dismantle antennae and gutters, and whatever else people did not have then. At the end the whole town burns down so we built the sets to burn

them down.

Then, painfully, the film had only mediocre success. If I have to choose between awards, reviews, and large audiences, I would always prefer a large audience. I'd rather communicate and have people receive my film well, as opposed to a lukewarm reaction, which means that I really did not reach people. When a critic writes that such and such is the greatest film ever, then this can be just as wrong as a devastating review. And awards are made by committees, where you have your cliques, and compromises are negotiated. The whole thing is somewhat dishonest. My only true measure is if someone pays 8 Marks at the box office and leaves saying it was worthwhile and then recommends my film to someone else.

Fischetti: German theaters show so few German films. Does that hurt your feelings, or do you just resign to the fact that that's the way things are?

Genée: It hurts a lot. But now it's slowly changing. Here in Munich, for example, my film ran in two theaters simultaneously, in one for nine weeks and in the other for eleven weeks; in Berlin it ran thirteen weeks. German cinema is getting popular again. Several years ago, I remember Alexander Kluge talking about the U.S. flooding the market and the crazy blackmailing tactics of distributors, making exhibitors show U.S. box office flops in order to get James Bond films. One example was GRUPPENBILD MIT DAME, a bad film which did poorly here. It was distributed by United Artists, who told theaters they had to show GRUPPENBILD for two weeks to get any other successful film. A distributor like Laurens Straub cannot threaten to withhold my film, ONE PLUS ONE. The theaters would say, "Forget it." We were afraid we would have to show our films only in the film museum and never get into the theaters, that German cinema would not have a chance. And then a lot of us said we should make films for audiences, and that it was wrong to make films with public funds just for personal reasons.

Fischetti: I found it remarkable that films by women are being shown now. For example, the only two German films we could see in Berlin theaters were DEUTSCHLAND, BLEICHE MUTTER and HUNGERJAFIRE. Does this mean that the women's film has become accepted, or is this just an accident? What do you think?

Genée: It has been accepted. Luckily, people have stopped asking what women's films are all about. They had thought in terms of genres — detective films, Westerns, and, also, women's films. Now it means that women's films provide unusual viewing experiences because they have mostly women as protagonists. This is what my audiences said, for example, about ONE PLUS ONE.

One youth, around 20, said naively that he had initially felt uneasy until he realized that he was used to seeing male protagonists. He realized that this film had a woman protagonist and the men were quite unheroic with all kinds of faults, and that normally it was the other way around.

But in my latest film, for example, I have two male protagonists, the little guy and Helmut Griem, and Christel Buschmann's film also has a male protagonist. Margarethe Von Trotta places women in the foreground, but she would never be exclusively interested in women's topics.

We should slowly get away from the idea that women directors are interested in nothing but women. Instead we should stress that we are offering an alternative view of things and look at many things normally omitted from films by men. For example, children do not exist in films by men — either they are absent, or they are silly types that say precocious things. In Bergman's *SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE* children exist, but they never show up. To bring children into the film, one would have to understand children and the way they feel and think, and most men aren't prone to doing that and would find it irrelevant.

Fischetti: Wouldn't you agree that with regard to films for and about children, little has been done?

Genée: I must say that television has helped. Its offerings for children and adolescents are a lot better than its prime time programming. I often watch these programs, which deal with problems children have, mostly in a light-hearted way but sometimes seriously. Children — or better, growing people — like seeing not just petty stuff but real problems. Afternoon programs can be produced like that because they have fewer restrictions. In the evening, for example, programs must feature well-known actors, or have a positive ending, or similar rubbish. The afternoon programs offer a fresh view of things, and though technically not always perfect, they are quite enjoyable. But feature films *with* children, with children playing parts, are very rare, and are mostly limited to the Tatum O'Neill types. I can't stand that.

Fischetti: Was it more difficult for you to establish yourself as a filmmaker than for a man?

Genée: No. I am an exception because I came to film rather early, through my father who wanted me to learn a bit about everything. I began as an assistant editor at the age of 19. Before that, I had to learn the business aspects. Then I stuck with editing and at 21 edited my first film. To be truthful, I gained immediate recognition.

That is not always the case. If your first film is a flop, you have to wait ten years before you get a second chance and people trust you. I was one of three editors in Germany who could be very choosy and pick the films and the directors for whom I wanted to work. In the end I only worked with Peter Lilienthal (I edited three of his films), Kluge, or Hark Bohm. All of them were interesting people with good projects.

When I directed my first film, *GRETE MINDE*, everyone knew I had learned my trade. Also I had done a lot of assistant directing before I had the children. If a film crew notices that you got where you are because of a good friend or obtained the money for the film in some

funny way, they can be quite cruel, even with male directors. They watch you for two to three days. If they notice that you cannot tell the camera lenses apart, you are finished.

With we women, of course, we have to be twice as good. That's the way it is. Now we see younger men who don't have a problem accepting women. But those our age or older only say that it's great that a woman is creative. My divorced husband expected to provide for the family, and me to stay at home. I could work, as long as I managed to do both. My husband just refused to be a partner. He always showed off with what I was doing, but he would never do the slightest thing to help me. Most men in a film crew find themselves in a similar situation. They respect you, yet they fear you.

My former husband somehow considered me a rival. He was not a director but a production manager. For an entire year, he had nothing to do because nobody was making any films. During that time, I was editing and making a lot of money. We had put some money aside, and the two girls had already been born. During this entire year he was unable to relax and to say to himself, "Why not work in the garden?" although he really liked gardening. Instead, he sat around and was miserable, pressuring himself that he had to provide for the family, that *he* was responsible.

Now everybody thinks it's great when I make fun of men. My producer says so too. But at home with his girlfriend, he keeps a very strict hierarchy. Somehow the two attitudes don't match. These men cannot change so easily.

Fischetti: Is it difficult for you to combine career and family?

Genée: Very difficult, indeed. Sometimes I have to be a top manager without five minutes for myself. My mother cannot always help out. She wants to have a life of her own and I think that's good. My problem, and yours too, is to strike a happy medium between not having my kids resent my work and saying working is more exciting and more important than spending time with my kids, or, on the other hand, insisting on motherhood by saying that having three children to raise is fulfilling enough. Nobody cares that you have three children and are alone with them. I may know how much work is involved. But if the film does not turn out the way it should, I cannot apologize because I had my three children with me during the shoot. You have to pretend to behave like your male colleagues. Yet when they wake up in the morning, their women bring breakfast and pay them compliments. When I wake up in the morning, I think of the new pair of pants I should buy my son Daniel or if I should not send him to a therapist after all or what's going on in school. When the kids are in bed at night, then I have time for a few thoughts of my own. But I cannot complain to anyone about that. That's the way it is. But it's not easy.

Fischetti: I always have these terrible guilt feelings ...

Genée: Same here. Daniel is old enough that I can talk with him. He is a very open child; he reads a lot and does a lot of things. It's really beautiful when you can share things with your children. This way I no longer feel guilty.

Fischetti: Another "woman's" question: Do you think movies have adequately portrayed women?

Genée: Not at all. I understand women's feelings and thoughts more readily than men's. It's so much closer to home. I have only experienced men in certain relations, or I have observed them in their relations with other women — I'll put this into a film. But we must communicate all our spontaneity and all we are not taught to repress. For example, no man cries — that's the way it is. And when a man directs a film, he will show what he is familiar with or what he has heard his friends say. So men's portrayal of women is off, even though I believe it's not intentionally so.

Fischetti: Are your male characters a little off?

Genée: Yes and no — in both films, even in GRETE MINDE. But Fontane wrote his story that way, and he was a man. You're finally relieved when Grete Minde's boyfriend dies and she's finally rid of him. But Fontane saw the boyfriend as weak.

But otherwise I can't help having a little bit of fun when I script male characters. The male actors don't fare so well. But I'm far from wanting all-women audiences. If I made films exclusively for women, word would travel fast, and the film would be a failure. I want people to see my films. It makes no sense to alienate men by saying, "Look how dumb you are and how great we women are." I have tried to avoid stereotypes.

In my films, men are funny but never artificial. Some of it I put quite mildly and not as bad as it actually happened to me because when something bad happens, I can see some of the funny sides, too. For example, the very moment when the world seems to crumble and you are quite desperate, your boyfriend hands you a bouquet of flowers wrapped in a check, which you are to use for an abortion. He does it in a very funny way, throwing off the wrappings and saying, "Look here, I got something for you."

I try to give my films this type of reality, the way I or my friends experienced it, including all the comedy. Once at the time we were splitting up, I suddenly realized my husband was wearing his shirt inside out. Things like that help you cope and not feel like giving up. That's what's in my films.

Conducted in Munich in January, 1981.

The Association of Women Film Workers

by Petra Haffter

translated by Marc Silberman

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Petre Haffter, filmmaker and producer, is one of the founding members of the *Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen* and sat on its board of directors for two years.

The Association was founded at the Hamburg Film Festival in Fall 1979, as a spontaneous reaction to the lack of representation by women in discussions there on film subsidy policies. Among the goals outlined in the constitution are the following:

- to support, encourage and inform about all films made by women which reflect feminist, emancipatory and non-sexist content and intent;
- to list, catalogue and collect old and new films made by women;
- to collaborate with and to support persons publishing information on women film workers and women in film;
- to support with advice and ongoing exchange of information women's film projects and applications for subsidies;
- to cooperate with domestic and foreign institutions and groups pursuing related goals.

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The following essay is a shortened version of an article which appeared in *Filmfaust* 27 (April/May, 1982), pp. 52-53.

The Association of Women Film Workers is an antidiscrimination group fighting for gender parity in all areas of audio-visual media ... That is the common basis, the consensus upon which we were able to agree, so that women with a wide variety of occupations and interests could join the Association. So states our constitution.

As I helped write this constitution and consider the Association's goal still unfulfilled, I will continue to support it. However, I find it pigheaded and tiring to constantly repeat our 50% demands. If the goal were reached, we could dissolve the Association immediately. Still, I believe that we cannot afford to lose sight of our main goal despite our many other activities: the primary work of the Association of Women Film Workers must be political. Our most important task remains that our demands be taken seriously, that they be taken into account in allocating subsidies and prizes, in appointing members to film juries and boards, and in formulating subsidy guidelines.

Our Association's membership extends from makeup artists to directors, from professionally employed camerawomen to film students. This creates problems — for example, when deciding what position to take in questions of film policymaking. A producer among us will have a different viewpoint from a film editor organized within a union. The differences arise from the women's differing economic conditions. In this specific case, the fact that both are women must not obscure their real differences. Therefore, in the future we must examine more carefully where we should take a position as women and where we can be politically more effective by working together with male colleagues in professional organizations which represent common interests — without forgetting, of course, our demand for 50% parity.

We also make dissimilar products — in content, form and aesthetics. We should continue to regard these dissimilarities as our diversity and strength and not use every opportunity to quarrel with each other. Nonetheless, we should also have the courage to talk about our films and their successes and failures. All the organizations representing the New German Cinema have neglected substantial cinematic discussion for years, out of fear that it will divide the ranks and injure individuals. Only recently has a cautious exchange begun. I think it must take place to build solidarity and do justice to our work. From our opponents we can only expect attacks.

As dissimilar as our professions and films are our attitudes toward women's politics. That was clear when we established the Association. We agreed on a minimal consensus in our constitution ... But for some time now our greatest potential has no longer lain with the filmmakers marked by the women's movement. Women have joined who were working usually in the specifically female film branches (editors, secretaries, costumers, etc.) for years. Moreover, young women have been joining (and in recent months that has affected the life of the Association decisively), young women for whom it seems self-evident that the film industry should contain a women's alliance.

As far as new talent is concerned, I wonder whether or not the special interests represented by the women who have not yet worked in the industry or have not yet produced a feature-length film could be better served by their respective professional organizations. The task of the Association of Women Film Workers is to assure that the demand for

gender parity should also be accepted by the Association of Young German Talent (*Verband deutscher Nachwuchsfilm* — an organization representing the interests of directors who have not yet produced a feature-length film — i.e. more than 60 minutes). Any other position will lead, in the long run, to concentrating the needs of women employed by the film industry within our Association, and so lead to a new ghetto for women. If we keep in mind that we want to reach gender parity in all audio-visual areas, then we must recognize that retreating into a corner will remove us from rather than bring us nearer to our goal

Women film workers must not be taken for granted in our country, and we all need support. As long as it was fashionable and popular, women were favored when it came to female themes, but reduced to that. How else should we interpret what we've heard so frequently of late — that a woman could make one episode of TATORT [Translator's note: one of the most popular detective series on German TV]? Women who want to work on something other than "typical female themes" get rejections. This reductive process reaches the apex of cynicism when, for example, in choosing a camerawoman, the director does not take artistic qualifications into account. The only thing that matters is that in a women's team shooting a women's film, a woman should stand behind the camera. I can only encourage all women to carefully consider such offers before accepting them, so we do not disqualify ourselves as women. We must fight against sex discrimination, but we also must prevent ourselves from being employed because we are women rather than professionally trained workers.

In this connection we should not overlook two facts: first, the economic basis upon which women filmmakers work; and second, the miserable educational opportunities for women film workers. Most women directors are still working with extremely small budgets because they must prove themselves individually as filmmakers and collectively as women. Consequently, they have particularly diminished free space, and this fact only emphasizes the imagination women have developed in order to find new possibilities and ways. Furthermore, we should not overlook the pressure to succeed from which we all suffer. We know quite well that flops by women come under much heavier attack and more quickly endanger a woman's career.

Nonetheless, we should begin to learn from our past experiences. If each of us accepts any condition just because we are thankful for a job, they will break our necks. We must begin to consider what we can achieve, for how much money, in what dimensions, and with what expectations. We must become more realistic in evaluating our own capabilities and qualifications if we want our demands and wishes to be taken seriously. When a woman acts consistently, her colleagues should not see that as betrayal but as a contribution towards achieving gender parity.

I understand some women's aversion to continuing discussions about the Association's tasks and goals, and I understand their weariness. Considering, however, the recent developments in film and television

policy-making that result from more general trends in our country, I find this weariness suicidal. The future has already begun and with it the dismantling of democratic rights, censorship measures, budget reductions and restructuring in all areas of film subsidy and financing through television. Our politics must become defensive politics — and by that I mean not only that of our Association but of all organizations allied in the National Coalition of German Film (*Bundesvereinigung des deutschen Films* — an umbrella organization coordinating ten other professional groups such as distributors, producers, filmmakers, etc. who are involved in the New German Cinema). Our work and solidarity among the organizations are becoming increasingly important.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Female sensuality Past joys and future hopes

by Gertrud Koch

translated by Reinhart Sonneburg
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WHAT IS AND WHY DO WE NEED FEMINIST FILM CRITICISM?

Feminists have begun to see that everything woman-made is not necessarily praiseworthy.^[1] But if we allow that to be woman-made does not perforce make a product "feminist," we face the considerable problem of having to establish criteria for what we would term "feminist." We need a theory to serve as a starting point from which to elucidate criteria. Using such a framework, we can substantiate these criteria so as to further discuss them. And this brings us right into the thick of things.

If we assume that "feminist film criticism and theory" designate a qualitative category and not simply women concerned with these matters, we do so above all in reference to the women's movement's own discussion of feminism. The women's movement has articulated various theories about women's social status, ones which serve to legitimate political strategies and which also come from and initiate many women's burgeoning new identities. Women's new self-image, kindled by the movement, also acts as the basis of feminist film criticism and as an alternative to the images which otherwise confront women: in billboards, magazines, floor polish cans, postcards, commercials, TV films, and the cinema.

This evolving female self-image necessarily conflicts with the images of women that society-at-large produces. A long process begins, for no woman who grew up surrounded by images hallowing her as an idealized entity can learn overnight to accept herself as her self and not in relation to these idealized images.

So far I have used the term "feminist theory" broadly and do not intend to discuss further the different positions within "feminist film theory." To consider "feminist film theory" is not simply an academic undertaking but is inextricably bound to a larger whole — the autonomous women's movement. "Feminist theory" has political implications because it contributes to its proponents' rising consciousness, thereby also guiding actions. This means with regard to women's relation to their visual images, first of all, that the most justified rage is no good if it remains speechless and unarticulated. We can situate, for example, vociferous reaction to a blatantly sexist film like *THE STORY OF O* with comparative ease in the framework of present political organizations, but things become more difficult in cases where sexism does not surface so openly. Here, tasks of analytical definition must begin.

Where sexism permeates various modes of expression but is not readily recognizable as the main content or even theme of a film (as the sexism is seen in *THE STORY OF O*), general "feminist theory" no longer suffices. We need medium-specific insights from film theory to articulate our objections and criticism of films intelligently.

For too long many women have assumed that it is enough to be sensitive feminists in order to be capable of judging films' depiction of women. But feminist film theory can turn those presentiments into certainties. In fact, feminist film theoreticians often disagree on a particular film's presentation of women. One person deems sexist what another calls realistic, and so on. This comes only partially from differing feminist positions. To a large extent, it stems from divergent positions within the film theory underlying the arguments.

Images leave a lot of room for interpretation, especially filmed images of women. One reason it's hard to analyze images is because they're inherently ambiguous and resist definitive interpretation. Yet we do not perceive a film as a mere string of images; we attribute meaning to the film as a whole. It is an individual, subjective process familiar to every woman who watches a film. About the film's meaning we often agree with others or we discuss different possible interpretations. But in so doing, we always presuppose that there are better or worse arguments in interpreting a film. We revise our opinion or maintain it — but we must prove it if we do not want to express mere personal prejudice. To justify an argument, we have to recall points within the film which provide the basis for our interpretation. We have to point out which shots and sequences, which special montage effects, plot patterns, or dialogue passages underlie our judgment. What we had been doing informally whenever we talked about a film after we got out of the movies, we can try to perform in a systematic and methodical fashion. Thus we can begin to think about how images generate meanings and how these meanings articulate social and aesthetic connections.

This puts us right into the thick of feminist film criticism. But what is "feminist" about it? Feminist film criticism differs from conventional

criticism mainly by being partisan. Although it is not opposed to anti-capitalist, leftist film criticism, feminist film criticism perceives capitalist society in a mediated form, that is, through women's situation. To say that feminist film criticism is partisan, however, does not imply that just being firmly rooted in feminism gives it an advantage over non-feminist criticism in each and every case. Partisanship here simply means that we lay open the positions that have served as the point of departure in developing our criticism — not that these positions are therefore unassailable. If we, as feminist film critics, take sides with women's cause, we do not immunize ourselves against criticism and become right by virtue of our standpoint. On the contrary, we also understand partisanship as the task of defining women's oppression in society and in filmic images as clearly and precisely as possible.

We do not sharpen our arguments in order to assert ourselves among academics or hold our own in critical in-fighting. Above all we seek to put forward incisive arguments in women's offensive for their self-determination and that of their filmic image. All women must know about these arguments — whether the women, as media employees, are trying to influence film products, or whether, as spectators, they have to struggle with the sexist viewing habits of their immediate TV and film environment. "Feminist film criticism," therefore, draws attention to the media's sexist ideology, so that these arguments are, whenever possible, a part of their everyday life.

We also have to develop feminist methods of film analysis because new methods accompany new intentions. Yet we do not create "feminist film theory" without presuppositions — *ab ovo*, as it were. We can make use of those methods of film analysis developed with the intent of criticizing ideology. And the criticism of ideology exists within the context of materialist social theory, paradigmatically developed by Marx.

Thus, in analyzing film, we must do more than classify female characters according to age, occupation, number of children, and income. We must analyze contradictions in the presentation of women and scrutinize ideological distortions, especially in the mode of presentation, the social utopias contained, or the use of female myths. An empiricist lapse would mean, for example, drawing the conclusion that Mae West plays the role of an emancipated woman merely because she can pick and choose her man. Only by ferreting out the latent meanings of her characterizations will we notice that Mae West by no means stands in contradiction to sexist ideologies and their socio-psychological basis.

In the feminist analysis of sexist ideologies, we need psychoanalytical paradigms. Many women have rejected psychoanalysis as a patriarchal and misogynic theory, but that rejection needs to be rethought. It is possible to reconsider the theory of penis envy, on which many feminists' flat condemnation of psychoanalysis is based, as a theory of power. We can criticize Freud, yet still gain from his insights to utilize the very methods of psychoanalysis for our own purposes.

Thus "feminist film theory" and "feminist film criticism" mean using the

following tactics: Use the existing possibilities for the critical analysis of ideology. Use methods from critical sociology. And use a reconstructed feminist psychoanalysis. We need these tools to provide arguments and methods for interpretation which relate concretely to the women's movement and to women's everyday life.

We must not limit ourselves to unmasking sexists and uttering justified demands for a different cinematic presentation of women. Such a procedure remains blind to the matter at hand. If our theory about the specific nature of female labor and its social importance is correct, we will discover in films (ideological products of this society) something which corresponds to our insights, even if distorted. To find such correspondences, we cannot simply examine the cinematic portrayal of women or look for positive models. We must discover concealed proofs of our theories.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. Female labor, the reproduction of domestic labor in the widest sense (i.e., not just through physical labor but also through emotional labor, which mediates social norms, especially in the education of children) plays a fundamental role in reproducing society as a whole. It follows that the objective importance of female labor for society will also appear in films that, on the manifest level, depict only a solidly sexist ideology and capitalist ethic. Using this thesis, we could, for example, analyze Howard Hawk's RIO BRAVO, a so-called men's film. There, irrespective of the female characters in the film, we might detect a portrayal of female labor which plays an important role in the film, even if presented ironically. This happens through the Walter Brennan figure, Stumpy, who stands out from this group of men not only because he is responsible for the housework, but because he also has to take charge of his companions' emotional well-being. Not taken seriously by the others, he makes an important contribution to maintaining their emotional equilibrium and individual happiness. He thus embodies the role which women play in real life. On the other hand, the film's women characters remain only pale projections of a stunted male sexuality, projections that correspond to the sexist division of females into sexual and nurturing object, into whore, mother, lover, and wife. The above analysis indicates that even where men seem to be reproducing themselves autonomously, the need to rely on female labor, at least qualitatively, catches up with them. Therefore the film's use of the Brennan character as "wife" once again point to the objective necessity of female labor in society. And in this film, this traditional division of labor asserts itself behind men's backs and right through their narrow minds.

Here I am reformulating and adding to Claire Johnston's call to search out instances in films where women occur as non-women, as male projections.^[2] We can now demand that male "autonomy" be revealed as a usurped autonomy, for men have always been dependent on that very female labor which they disown and whose importance they negate. This insight could very well serve as a point of departure to analyze the so-called men's films. Such an analysis would not only denounce sexism

but would make it understood that male ideology denies female labor, which, despite this very denial, has left its traces in these films. This might be the key critical tool we need to account for feminists' subjective enjoyment of films that at first sight are clearly sexist in how they portray women.

Especially in screwball and slapstick comedies, which abound with polymorphic-perverse role changes, women generally get shown in a bad light. Nevertheless the women often come into their own dressed up as men — through the back door of comedy, so to speak. Laughter, a physical expression and reaction that can sneak past to stop signs of taboos, certainly creates here an important precondition. Thus, especially in comic roles and ironical characterizations, recourse to femininity is most likely to take place. In considering such comic devices, we should increasingly reflect upon our own reactions and our viewing experiences in the cinema. Maybe we can learn something, not by suppressing our laughter and genuine reactions to sexist films through a guilty conscience, but by asking ourselves why at certain points we react in such and such a way. For this, however, we need more than just film theory. We must look to theories about the organization of our perceptive capacities and their sex-specific characteristics.

PERCEPTION AND THE PROCESS OF REIFICATION

Previous feminist film theory has not considered sufficiently women's inner motivations for going to movies. Feminist film theory has analyzed female film myths, and the relations of these myths to male fantasies, as well as to the male producers and consumers of these myths. However, we have few feminist methodical attempts to explain how female spectators might deal with these myths. This lack seems greatly due to the fact that feminists often have a *moral* relation to cinema. Following the French school around Lacan, they reject a world of images which they perceive, and rightly so as part of the male symbolic realm. As a consequence these feminist critics rarely consider to what extent film's myths have been internalized by female spectators.

This approach has elsewhere been widely and justifiably attacked, for in such a construct woman is seen as a void, an object, and not as a subject. In contrast, I would like to show how in women's enjoyment of movies, a shift can be well-detected, a shift from woman as object in patriarchal society to subject. Central to this dynamic are two processes. First, woman is socially constituted as spectacle, as a sensual-visual object. On the other hand, the woman as subject also has her own path to the acquisition of the world of objects. Thus I distinguish between men's perception of women and a woman's own perception of herself and other women. In so doing, I assume a basic lack of reciprocity between these two points of view which clearly derives from the sexual inequality common to patriarchal societies.

THE CONSTITUTION OF WOMAN AS SPECTACLE

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre analyzes how domination is

produced through gazes, how exerting the power of the gaze renders the subject into an object, a thing. When someone stares at us, we become their object. Their glance evaluates us. Sartre describes this situation in ontological terms but it is one familiar to every woman. Women regularly experience the domination of appraising glances that reduce them to objects of assessment and subjugation. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues:

"I am fixing the people whom I see into objects; I am in relation to them as the Other is in relation to me. In looking at them I measure my power."[\[3\]](#)

"Thus being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as 'slaves' insofar as we appear to the Other. But this slavery is not a historical result — capable of being surmounted — of a *life* in the abstract form of consciousness. I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center on a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being. Insofar as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved."[\[4\]](#)

We can translate what Sartre discusses in his "Essay in Phenomenological Ontology" into more tangible terms, those of servitude. Less and less do women view such a condition as an ontological one. More and more they seek to end this state of affairs. What Sartre metaphorically describes in terms of the circulatory system and calls a reciprocal process[\[5\]](#) has manifested itself historically in the oppression of women. This happens in anything but a reciprocal way. Women have few occasions to indulge in the power of the dominating stare, which men have traditionally enjoyed. If we free Sartre's text of its ontological underpinning, we confront directly the social problem inherent in the power of the gaze.

In their informative study, "Augen-Blicke: Über einige Vorurteile und Einschränkungen geschlechtsspezifischer Wahrnehmung," Gisela Schneider and Klaus Laermann have traced in art history the taboos to which the female gaze has been subject.[\[6\]](#) This micro-sociological account of the female gaze under male domination demonstrates that the Sartrean exchange of gazes is unequal. Schneider and Laermann correctly point out that one of the main characteristics of the male gaze is its desubjectivizing power:

"It is above all the male gaze which continually lapses into this sort of abstraction. Especially when men take a purely receptive stance toward the object of their gaze, they seek to detach themselves. Their ideal mode of seeing is a desubjectivized gaze which appears able to touch everything because nothing touches it. It is both neutralized and neutralizing ... The neutralization of his gaze, which he must

force upon himself, pushes the merely subjective images and human sensations outside of his periphery."[\[7\]](#)

They attribute a compulsion toward abstraction in the male gaze. Such a psychic mechanism implies a corresponding social concept inherent in our historically evolved patriarchal society. (In other patriarchal societies things might be different.) This is the concept of the bartering society. Here I draw on for my model Alfred Sohn-Rethel's equation of commodity form and mode of thinking, a notion I will first describe before drawing a few conclusions regarding people's perception and construction of visual worlds.

Sohn-Rethel assumes that abstract categorial thinking evolved with the rise of abstraction in bartering values. He likens the bartering of commodities — which takes place in abstract units — to abstract thinking — which moves from concrete objects to categorical abstractions. Such a process of abstraction, no doubt, also applies to visual relations between the sexes. Men turn women into objects and subsume them in market strategies. Such a habit of perception follows from the fact that the male gaze is determined by this commodity form.

The identity of commodity form and mode of thinking, which both find their counterpart in bartering's abstract nature, leads to a perceptual desensualization and desubjectivization of concrete things as well as concrete nature. Concrete and subjective visual impressions become preempted by standardized and abstract patterns. The male image of concrete things becomes a pictogram, a schematic nucleus of a previously concrete visualization. This means that the male gaze is no longer direct; rather it scans abstract patterns before it encounters a woman's sensually concrete image. The desensualization of the visible world goes hand-in-hand with the reification of woman as an object of barter. Following Sartre's analysis of domination through gazing, we can discern a twofold reification of woman in this activity. In the first instance, reification has already taken place before man gazed at woman. It is not the reification of direct interaction, but reification into a commodity that forms the basis of the bartering abstraction. The second instance follows directly from the first one. There, the male gazes at the female with x-ray eyes, with a judgmental stare that sees the pictogram of an abstract and essentialized woman behind her concrete appearance.

With this in mind, we can reconstruct the arguments used by women during the recent suit against the magazine *Stern* for its sexist cover photos. The concrete situation at the root of this controversy is the following one: a man idles at a newsstand, perusing magazine covers that portray nude women. At the same moment a woman passes by and notices the man gazing at these photographs. He casts an appraising look at her; she in turn feels ashamed. But why does the woman feel ashamed and under what conditions would the man be the one to feel ashamed? In Sartre's mind, a man becomes ashamed when he feels himself observed as a voyeur. But such voyeurism and its inherent

transactional reification stand as an accepted social convention — one guaranteed as a male privilege. Thus, the man can overlook his shame by subjectivizing his gaze and transforming it into a scrutinizing and untouchable one. The gaze runs the social gamut of reification and abstraction. Its male bearer summarily compares a standardized image he has of women with the concrete image before him. For the woman, this confrontation means the following: Due to her social status, as shall be seen later, she cannot take recourse to abstract reification. For her the standardized picture of the woman on the cover virtually embodies part of her own social identity. She experiences her own actual subjective identity vis-à-vis this photo as a deviation, a stigma.^[8] She feels ashamed on an interactional level because she feels a crucial part of her identity being encroached upon. Even though the woman has the initial advantage (for her gaze unmasks the voyeur), the evasive action of the male succeeds in reducing her to a feeling of shame.

Probably wide-spread male fetishization of certain parts of the female anatomy (beautiful legs, firm breasts, etc.) can be explained in psychoanalytical terms. It also can be explained in terms of commodity fetishism, which views any deviation from the image of ideal woman (stubby legs, flabby breasts, etc.) as lowering a woman's social exchange value. In discussing Sartre's notion of the "body," Herbert Marcuse reveals that the vicious circle of reification ceases once we consider the concrete sensual body as "flesh":

"And the one point, the one moment which appears as fulfillment [sic], possession, is where and when man becomes a thing: body, flesh; and his free activity becomes complete inertia: caressing the body as thing. The *Ego*, thus far separated from the "things" and therefore dominating and exploiting them, now has become a "thing" itself — but the thing, in turn, has been freed to its own pure existence."^[9]

To assert that the lecherous male gaze turns women into "sex objects" seems here valid only when we consider the twofold force of reification. Otherwise we do not clearly see that such designations refer to a desensualized sexuality (one determined by the commodity form) and not to other underlying personal interactions that form the basis of erotic love.

We must also contrast female modes of perception in commodity-producing, patriarchal societies with male ones. Here some hypotheses suggest themselves. As a rule, woman is excluded from the sphere of production. Insofar as her actual social identity does not derive solely from labor outside the house, but rather is also (or primarily), anchored in the sphere of reproduction within a household, she is marked by her daily dealings with commodities in terms of their use value. Indeed, she takes charge of their consumption. The work she performs in the home corresponds to pre-industrial patterns. The activities of washing, ironing, mending, and cooking are sensual and concrete ones, which are

not meant to produce commodities that might be bartered on the market. The utility value of these activities is grounded in everyday needs.

Because a woman working in the household is not as bound up in the production sphere nor likely thereby to expand her horizon or influence, her capacity for abstraction may often be relatively underdeveloped. This price comes from society's confining women to an anachronistic pre-capitalistic state. The female penchant for practical thinking emerges as a consequence of this traditional form of socialization. Woman's situation at society's fringe has its concrete and sensual advantages, and ultimately it means for many women an increased sensitivity. In her everyday life, the housewife is responsible for arranging aesthetically the tangible objects within the living space. This includes decorating the apartment, laying out knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, and in general identifying herself with the environment she creates (a beautiful carpet, well-ordered furniture, stately drapes, tasty meals, a well-dressed husband, and immaculately groomed children). Her dress should not only be proper but also pretty; the apartment should be clean and comfortable, meals nutritious as well as delicious; the carpet should not only absorb sound but also be pleasing to the eye. Such an orientation of female labor leads to an aestheticization of woman's everyday existence. At the point where she attempts to transcend the everyday through a symbolic ordering of aesthetic signs, though, she runs up against male patterns of reification and standardization.

Perhaps this explains why women allegedly have a predilection for kitsch. In dealing with the culture industry's standardized products, women lose their aesthetic bearings. The practical sense can no longer distinguish between the categories underlying standardized production. Women have no other alternative but to follow slavishly, over and over again, certain recipes and instructions. They stand at the mercy of the prefabricated designs promulgated by the media. Or when they attempt to exercise some aesthetic autonomy in their housework, they run the risk of confusing things, like putting a plastic sofa on top of a Persian rug or placing artificial flowers in an antique vase. While men in their grey suits with their functionalized preferences escape these dilemmas, women face the reproach of bad taste when their aesthetic sense is confounded by the inordinately large supply of commodities on the market.

A woman's aesthetic needs stand firmly rooted in her everyday experience and are determined further by her minority status. Above all, her sensuality — a result of these activities and this situation — becomes most likely to be punished by patriarchal society. Men have always feared unrestrained female sensuality and therefore strongly forbidden it. Female sensuality only gains social legitimacy as a function of the male psyche. It is, however, severely punished when it tries to go its own independent way. This sensuality may be kept in abeyance by corsets and crinolines, mouselike pleats, modest blushing, and meek glances.

Nonetheless, even in the Victorian era where the prevailing image of women was one which totally disavowed their sensuality, women's dreams and fears, which emerged in 19th century literature and art, betrayed a very precise knowledge of this capacity's deeply rooted nature, even when their socialization sought to contain it.[\[10\]](#) Visual curiosity is a means of access to the concrete tangible world, but that curiosity is subject to various — and different — taboos for men and women. Now we must investigate these taboos and their implications for film history and analyze the needs to which cinema caters, how cinema satisfied these needs, and why diverging attitudes toward and preferences for certain genres result from these taboos.

THE CINEMA AS THE REALM OF INSTITUTIONALIZED VOYEURISM

Female sensuality becomes suppressed whenever it transcends the socially accepted domestic realm. When a woman leaves the home, she becomes literally blindfolded. The veil she had to wear in past eras, the make-up, the modestly averted glance, all go to show that these rituals not only hid her from the gazes of others, but that "those others" likewise were also protected by these means from woman's malevolently sensual gaze. In Luchino Visconti's *L'INNOCENTE* this dialectic appears in a ritualized scene. In the presence of her husband, the woman veils her face before she leaves the house. Certain gestures and camera angles which reflect the husband's attempts to catch his wife's eye suggest the uneasiness with which he is overcome. Has his wife put on the veil to reject the gazes of his male rivals? Or has she done so to go to a rendezvous with her lover unrecognized, thus concealing her longing gazes under a respectable wife's veil?

In the movie theater, the realm of institutionalized voyeurism, women gain a freedom in the protection of darkness to indulge themselves in a voyeurism otherwise denied them. For a long time it was considered improper for a woman to go to the movies unaccompanied. This was not merely a class consideration (the cinema seen as a proletarian diversion). Even when the cinema had been assimilated by the middle class, the taboo remained in the minds of my women who only attended movies on the sly.[\[11\]](#)

Cinema has lost much of its allure for women. In the process of cinema's decline, women — much more so than men — have ceased to pursue their former pastime. The question foremost in our minds right now is this one: To what extent can women's abstention from filmgoing be seen as their reacting to changes in film offerings which have increasingly neglected female viewers' preferences?

The mid-sixties saw the collapse of the old star system in Hollywood films, and from these films the German market had imported the majority of its offerings. Only a few male veterans — John Wayne and several others — survived that system's downfall. Female stars, much more the objects of youth fetishism, had long since retreated from the screen. A new type of multitalented actor was coming to the fore.

Commercial cinema, as exemplified by the Hollywood industry, had thus lost its remaining vestiges of aura, the last aura to be found in bourgeois art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin had foreseen the atrophy of narrative film's aura. Nonetheless, the cinema went on producing auratic elements of consequence, especially in its stars, whose uniqueness and singularity fascinated spectators witnessing the here and now of the screen experience.

Initially we suggested that the concept of standardization follows as a perceptual consequence from the equation of commodity form and mode of thinking. With regard to the culture industry, this means that the increasing standardization and progressive destruction of film's remaining vestiges of aura (in the form of movie stars) stands as a consequence of the inner logic of desensualization and desubjectivization which accompany the male gaze.

Using the term "male cinema" seems quite justified, especially when we are speaking of the standardized output since the mid-sixties. Many of these productions no longer reflect the coherent, closed worldviews and ideologies which had been characteristic of earlier films. These newer films merely depict normative social behavior. In the cinema young people become acquainted with the world of commodities. They learn how to hold a glass of whiskey, how to kiss a woman, how to open the door of an elegant car, how to assert oneself. Traces of standardization, desensualization, and a loss of meaning can be found in the giant culture industry of the Hollywood studios from its beginnings. This is why television usurped Hollywood's throne and stands as a worthy successor — and Hollywood would be the last one to complain about this. European stars like Pola Negri, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich, imported fragments of aura as part of their European cultural tradition and enhanced thereby the identification of their female audiences. The star worship to which women succumbed much more often than men — no female star aroused a male mass psychosis comparable to the one created by Rudolph Valentino among women — corresponded quite closely to the female mode of perception: identification with the narcissistic exaggerations of fanciful costumes and grandiose sets and the predilection for the tangible here and now which complemented the aura around the stars. These factors assured the star-studded Hollywood cinema the loyalty of its female audience.[\[12\]](#)

With its loss of stars and the last auratic moments in its commercial products, U.S. film did not by chance also lose its female audience. In recent years, in fact, the film industry has started again to make films in which women play central roles. On the other hand, though, the desensualized male gaze has been satisfied by the numerous sex films which have emerged. The desensualized standardization of importunate male gazes and the crude impetus toward a "raw lust for possession" (Karl Marx) which are presented in sex films clearly form but two sides of the same coin. They are the poles that hold together male identity without, however, merging its split psyche.

This division of male perception has as a consequence porno houses; these establishments are not simply the invention of a few capitalists. The popularity of such cinemas clearly shows that they cater to needs not otherwise satisfied by the culture industry. This division, however, derives from the male market: it takes its form from male perception. The predicted end of the cinema which Adorno and Horkheimer foresaw already in the 40s has come close to realization:

"If most of the radio stations and movie theaters were closed down, the consumers would probably not lose so very much. To walk from the street into the movie theater is no longer to enter a world of dream; as soon as the very existence of these institutions no longer made it obligatory to use them, there would be no great urge to do so. Such closures would not be reactionary machine wrecking. The disappointment would be felt not so much by the enthusiasts as by the slow-witted, who are the ones who suffer for everything anyhow. In spite of the films which are intended to complete her integration, the housewife finds in the darkness of the movie theater a place of refuge where she can sit for a few hours with nobody watching, just as she used to look out of the window when there were still homes and rest in the evening.[\[13\]](#)

Notes

[1.](#) This section appeared in a more lengthy version as "Was Ist und Wozu Brauchen Wir Eine Feministische Filmkritik?" in *frauen und film*, No. 11 (March 1977), pp. 3-9.

[2.](#) Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: British Film Institute, 1975), pp. 24-31.

[3.](#) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, special abridged edition (New York: Citadel Press, 1966), p. 242.

[4.](#) Ibid., p. 243.

[5.](#) Ibid., p. 237:

"Earlier we were able to call this internal hemorrhage the flow of my world toward the Other-as-object. This was because the flow of blood was trapped and localized by the very fact that I fixed as an object in my world that Object toward which this world was bleeding. Thus not a drop of blood was lost; all was recovered, surrounded, localized although in a being which I could not penetrate."

Referring to Sartre's work, Herbert Marcuse describes this movement as a circular one. See "Sartre's Existentialism," in Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 169. Elsewhere

in the same essay Marcuse points out an underlying ideological motif: "Behind the nihilistic language of Existentialism lurks the ideology of free competition, free initiative, and equal opportunity" (p. 174).

6. Gisela Schneider and Klaus Laermann, "Augen-Blicke. Über einige Vorurteile und Einschränkungen geschlechtsspezifischer Wahrnehmung," *Kursbuch*, No. 49, pp. 36-58.

7. Ibid., p. 47.

8. Cf. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), P. 127. Goffman's stigma theory distinguishes between virtual and actual identity:

"The most fortunate of normals is likely to have his half-hidden failing, and for every little failing there is a social occasion when it will loom large, creating a shameful gap between virtual and actual social identity."

9. Marcuse, op. cit., p. 181.

10. Cf. the collection of myths in Hoffman R. Hays, *The Dangerous Sex: The Myth of Feminine Evil* (New York: Putnam, 1964). Hays interprets these myths psychoanalytically, focusing on the fear of women expressed in them. He neglects to point out the societal patterns from which these myths stem, and therefore he comes to the conclusion that from Poe to Baudelaire women were experienced as fear-inducing. Hays contrasts this with a rationalist model of enlightenment without considering the limitations of a society opposed to true enlightenment. In Baudelaire's work, for example, Hayes overlooks the utopian vision of an asexual society, which avoids the reification of traditional society and thus furthers an authentic expression of sensuality. Explicitly misogynic studies often seem more able to do justice to women's subjectivity than the well-meaning ones which patronizingly refer to the "social" traits of women.

11. Cf. the accounts of female spectators in *frauen und film*, No. 17 (Sept. 1978), esp. Karsten Witte, "'Meine Ureigene Leidenschaft' Gespräch mit Elisabeth Ries, Meiner Grossmutter," pp. 2627:

"Karsten: When you moved to Hamburg in 1918 and got married, did you keep going to movies?

Elisabeth Ries: No, not at first, because my husband wouldn't go with me. But later on I went to the 'Passage' in the Monckebergerstrasse, sometimes even in the morning. There was also a very good morning program at the Steindamm. I went there often in the morning.

Karsten: Were you allowed to do that?

Elisabeth Ries: What, was I allowed to? I never asked. I had been married for some time and had children.

Karsten: But grandfather was opposed to the cinema.

Elsbeth Ries: Yes, but he never found out. I was always back home by noon and the children were in school."

[12.](#) On a political level the worship of movie stars corresponds to idolatry and in fascism to the Fuhrer-cult. Women may enjoy the equality which allows them to vote, but this nominal achievement hardly suffices to break down the social barriers that have created female concretism. Those who would continue to lament the wanting democratic sensibility among women, however, usually are not willing to accept a more encompassing definition of emancipation. Rather than discuss the conservatism of some women in a social context, they insist on pseudo-psychological arguments which in no way mediate psychic and social experience as products of a larger framework.

[13.](#) Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 139.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Critical dialogue *Under Fire*

by Elayne Rapping and Robert Simon

from *Jump Cut*, no. 30, March 1985, p. 70

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Under Fire

— Elayne Rapping

I would like to suggest another political reading of UNDER FIRE, which differs from the review printed in JUMP CUT, No. 29, and indeed from most left responses to the film.

I cannot argue with any of Bray's points about the slick, adventure/romance conventions used by the filmmakers. The focus on a white professional journalist and his love and career troubles was obviously less than, shall we say, revolutionary. As Bray says, WHEN THE MOUNTAINS TREMBLE (and the recent EL NORTE too, for that matter) are far more accurate and serious in their portrayal of Central American issues from a native (third world) point of view.

However, there are two important points that I think need to be made here: one about the size and nature of the audience who saw this film; the other about a very real political virtue that made this film unique and, I would say, progressive, in impact.

There is no question at all that this film was made for a mainstream audience and therefore reflected and spoke to a bourgeois mindset. Like Costa-Gavras' MISSING, it focused on a middle class professional as hero, not on the third world people involved. It was slick, glamorous, and highly oversimplified in its treatment of the Sandinista struggle and the guerrillas themselves. But there is a political reality here that is not addressed by making such charges in the ideological abstract. The situation in Central America today and the role of our government in it are of crisis proportions. The media, which is the source of most information and opinion on international affairs, distorts and lies about these matters. Soviet and Cuban input in particular are exaggerated and lied about, in an effort to turn the entire situation into a Cold War conflict between democracy and Communism. In such a climate, the

wide audience which the film has and will continue to attract — especially through cable and pay-TV — will be seeing a view on the issues which differs significantly from what they are used to, especially in its sympathy — sappy as it is — for the rebels.

But even more important, I think that the real political issue of this film is overlooked by those on the left determined to find fault with a less than "correct" portrayal of third world life. Sure, it's absurd to think that a journalist could have such influence on a third world revolutionary struggle as Nolte has merely by falsifying a photo. And the portrayal of Rafael as a hero-figure is individualistic and unfair to Sandinista history. (Although even there, the importance of hero-figures like Che, Martin Luther King, Mao — in the context of real mass struggles — is not necessarily a bad thing.)

But this film was really about something more important for U.S. audiences to see and think about. It depicted a man and a woman who represent and enjoy the privileges and glory of the bourgeois press in its amoral, often exploitative role of using revolutionary movements and struggles to sell papers. The reporters themselves may gain fame and fortune. What the movie showed — albeit in an oversimplified, shallow way — was two people coming to sympathize with "the other side" to such an extent that they jeopardize their careers as they commit themselves to helping a third world revolutionary movement. This is the film's dramatic intent, I would argue, and not its more obvious "journalism and objectivity" theme. Young men and women who saw Nick Nolte as a hero in trashy films like 48 HOURS now could see him as a journalist who cares and acts. For example, my own teenage son and many of my college age students were moved by this new aspect of superstar heroism. Hollywood usually pushes as a way of life cynicism, self-interest and fame and money at all costs. It's one of the main ways ideology functions to keep young people from becoming politically active. Again and again, film and TV tell us that human nature is as capitalism has presently made it: unprincipled, uncaring, and incapable of changing itself or the world. In such a world, it's remarkable to see an image of a Hollywood tough guy moving — no matter how quickly and impulsively — from the white professional big-time to a position of support and activism, at risk of personal loss.

It is a serious and common error of left film critics to judge movies by abstract aesthetic and political standards which discount the political and social reality in which the films are viewed. As an activist as well as a media critic, I think it's important to think in terms of this country's political realities and how a film will affect and perhaps change dominant attitudes about political issues. Central American activists whom I have spoken to — a member of AMES (the Salvadoran Women's Association), a representative of the FDR, and a Nicaraguan consul in the U.S. — have praised MISSING and UNDER FIRE because of their positive alternative and moving depictions of Central America and of U.S. citizens' options and even responsibilities. I respect these activists' insights. It is not melodramatic to say that Nicaragua is under siege and

anticipates a U.S. invasion, and that this is a crisis of major proportion for U.S. leftists and for the people of Central America. No "left" film critic should ignore those flesh and blood realities. If this film convinces lots of people that we are "on the wrong side" again, and that it is in fact heroic and even "glamorous" to take a stand for justice at great personal expense, UNDER FIRE is a good movie to have around. To be sure, WHEN THE MOUNTAINS TREMBLE is a better one. But that is not the point. How many already unconvinced people will see WHEN THE MOUNTAINS TREMBLE? It's fine, even crucial, to have leftists on the east and west coasts see wonderful political movies. But for different reasons, a slicker, more superficial movie like UNDER FIRE may be equally important. These reasons are due to its potential audience size and composition, and its rare portrayal of political commitment and activism as a key element in Hollywood "heroism."

Under Fire

— Robert Simon

I agree with all Marjorie Bray's observations about UNDER FIRE but one. The journalists did not falsify the photograph of the dead Sandinista leader because the truth of his death would have disheartened the revolutionaries. They falsified the photograph because Somoza was using "Rafael's" death to prove that he, Somoza, was worthy of receiving U.S. military aid (at a time when many in the United States had written him off as a losing dictator.) The message here is not that the revolution needs a big lie, but that it is difficult to be a neutral reporter when the flow of information is part of a greater system of imperialism. The film demonstrates that it would be unreasonable to ask the present Nicaraguan government to place no restrictions on the press.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word From Bloomington, Indiana, to Estelí, Nicaragua

by the editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 30, March 1985, pp. 71-72

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JUMP CUT's three co-editors, John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage, met in graduate school in the Comparative Literature Program at Indiana University in 1971. We started JUMP CUT in 1974. Since then we have taught film studies full or part time and done left and feminist political work. JUMP CUT has been our main political activity during these years.

Last year at different times we all visited Estelí, Nicaragua, a provincial capital about 100 miles north of Managua which has faced extensive attacks by the contras against the farms in the surrounding areas but not on the city itself. We stayed there for five weeks studying Spanish and living with local families as part of the NICA program. NICA (Nuevo Instituto de Centro America, P.O. Box 1409, Cambridge, MA, 02238, 617/497-7142) arranges room and board with local families, morning Spanish classes at all levels, meetings with local leaders and activists, and opportunities for volunteer work. It is an excellent way to get to know the Nicaraguan revolution from the inside. (Cost for the five-week program runs about \$2000, including air fare, and some scholarships are available.)

Chuck and Julia spent an additional two weeks in Managua working and living with videomakers from the People's Video Workshop (Taller de Video Popular) of the Sandinista industrial workers' union (Central Sandinista de Trabajadores) and the salaried farm workers' union (Asociación de Trabajadores de Campo). Julia had worked with that group in 1981, teaching super-8 filmmaking and from that experience made a videotape on Nicaraguan women, LAS NICAS. John spent an additional week in Managua talking with film and videomakers and also with trade union leaders.

The three of us grew a lot intellectually and emotionally from visiting

the Nicaraguan revolution. In fact, the Sandinistas foresee such growth and so encourage people from abroad to visit and share the lives of the poor inside this young revolution. Over 100,000 North Americans have visited Nicaragua since July, 1979. Not only were we enveloped in trust and love, but we lived in an environment where ordinary people felt empowered as citizens. On the level of everyday interaction, we regularly met what Antonio Gramsci called "organic intellectuals," intellectuals from the masses. In Nicaragua we saw that it is the poor who are the intellectuals and have the sharpest political analyses, for they know that they have political power. And they defend this with their lives and the lives of their children.

From the families we lived with, we learned how the extended family networks among the poor, often a network of women, serve to provide for all members in a society of scarcity, and we also experienced how these families have been politicized and kept in a constant state of tension as members go off to fight the contras, are killed, or often return traumatized or knowing that soon they may have to go off to fight again. Each family we lived with not only suffered losses during the revolution, but they had suffered the loss of a cousin, son, or husband to the contras or had older children currently on active duty. Because of the war trauma and because of hope in the revolution, free schooling and health care, there is a baby boom in Nicaragua. The median age in Nicaragua is 15, and there we felt surrounded by children, which made us understand how people are determined to defend a country that is, in many ways, a cradle. Families we lived with shared with us their hope and tenacity and courage, as well as their grief, and these emotions have become embedded in our lives.

From that trip, Chuck and Julia taped about thirty hours of video (VHS format) to record this mixture of hardship and vivacity that we found among the poor people of Nicaragua. The first edited 35-minute program, HOME LIFE, is now in distribution, along with a 47-minute program on Nicaraguan women, LAS NICAS, made from interviews done with Nicaraguan women in 1981 and 1982 by Julia Lesage and Carole Isaacs. HOME LIFE is a bilingual tape in Spanish and English, and it shows a visit to the Diaz family in Estelí. It is intended to be a useful organizing tool for anyone to use who has visited Nicaragua on a tour or a solidarity brigade and wants to show people here what an average Nicaraguan family's aspirations and living conditions are like (for distribution, contact Facets Multimedia in Chicago).

For the last three years John has been working with Trade Unionists in Solidarity with El Salvador (TUSES) in the San Francisco Bay Area. This work involves educating about and organizing solidarity with the people of El Salvador and Central America within local trade unions, which have been moving increasingly away from the usual AFL-CIO support for an interventionist foreign policy. John spoke about his trip to union groups and showed his slides to rank and file trade unionists. He is currently helping to organize the extensive labor participation in the Spring Mobilization for Peace, Jobs, and Justice, a huge coalition of

labor, church, community, peace, and solidarity groups, which includes non-intervention in Central America as a major theme.

Our activity in anti-imperialist solidarity work both derives from and contributes to the political and intellectual process that is JUMP CUT. We have become more sophisticated in our approach to Third World film as we have entered more directly into anti-imperialist struggles. Traveling to Nicaragua and doing interviews, video and photographic work there comes out of our understanding the need to combine the political and personal aspects of our lives and to unite our intellectual work with concrete organizing.

Contemporary media

With this issue, we are changing our name to JUMP CUT: A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA, instead of A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA. Like many others who started out studying film, we now wish to include television, video, photography, advertising, and other parts of mass culture in our formal range of concerns. This reflects the actual changing conditions of audio and video culture around us. For example, feature films are released on videocassettes almost as soon as their theatrical release. Videorecorders have changed television viewing habits and now interface with computers, Radical media makers working in the community often rely on using video equipment from cable access stations and have to organize to fight cable companies that want to close down public access stations with the excuse that these are "underused." Serious television criticism is just beginning to come into its own and has to fight to be recognized in humanities and film departments. Furthermore, with articles in JUMP CUT such as our interview with Daniel Solis on the role of Betamax and super-8 in revolutionary El Salvador (#29), our own awareness of the radical potential of alternate consumer media formats has expanded.

JUMP CUT's goal remains the same — to develop radical media criticism. We recognize a multiplicity of issues — sexual/political, economic, racial, formal, etc. — that need to be addressed all at once if we are to build an adequate progressive cultural practice. However, antagonisms exist between different groups, organizations and constituencies around these issues. We often hear comments such as these: "Film is more effective than video." "If we get on television, we will reach many more people." "Films made in familiar forms with high production values communicate their message best." "Homosexuality (or feminism or music video or Brazil or film production practices or distribution, etc.) is not our concern."

In terms of the articles published in JUMP CUT, our readers often see no self-evident connection between the various kinds of material we cover. For example, this issue contains side by side analyses of revolutionary Latin American cinema, gay pornography, feminist approaches to pornography, and contemporary German women's filmmaking. By publishing such kinds of material in this way, JUMP

CUT has established its own political form, that of coalition politics, a difficult form that now characterizes progressive forces in the United States. What coalition politics demand is a willingness to listen to the political needs of the other groups, and to work together in a principled way for specific goals. In terms of the constituencies represented in JUMP CUT, it means men taking feminist issues seriously, white filmmakers understanding and aiding the struggle of minority filmmakers to produce and develop, straight critics learning the concerns and views of lesbian and gay critics. It means a lot of listening and patience, and ultimately a willingness to incorporate the deeply felt concerns of others into our own approach — even if this sometimes seems and feels contradictory or even threatening.

In the Spring Mobilization Coalition in San Francisco people who wouldn't be in the same room with each other six months ago are working together for a common goal — a demonstration on April 20. Trade union leaders listen to the often esoteric political debates of left groups; youthful solidarity activists and students respect the views of elderly activists; black and latino activists are working together with lesbian and gay activists. Disagreements, bitterness and frustration continue, but a tremendous energy and excitement has been released by working together for a common goal

Editorial direction

The areas or topics that we have emphasized in JUMP CUT over the last ten years give an indication of our political focus as well. However, within that general scope, we have not developed an editorial or political line, but rather a general editorial and political direction. We have emphasized mass culture, i.e., analyses of Hollywood films, and independent film and video, especially that with a political orientation. We have developed feminist criticism and analysis. We have covered Third World film, especially Latin American film. Politically as leftists working in the sphere of culture and ideology, we see ourselves as trying to work on the question of the relation of sex, race, and class within the framework of a shared anti-imperialist analysis. For people whose frame of reference or whose experience is different, this mixture of concerns often seems peculiar. In particular, some of our Third World readers have told us that JUMP CUT seems to have a strange attachment to analyzing lesbian and gay issues, issues which seem invisible in their countries within their frame of reference as they fight their most obvious oppression.

One of the peculiarities of advanced capitalism is that it allows (or forces) the posing of some issues which do not have the same impact or meaning elsewhere. The contradictions developing in the superpowers often foreshadow what happens elsewhere — contradictions within the mass media, within a computerized white-collar work force, and within polluted, industrialized urban environments. We do not claim to be superior in acumen. We work in the way that we do because we are convinced that a movement which recognizes — in its theory and in its

practice — the interconnections of race, class, and sex is the only one that can develop and unite the progressive forces in the United States. And if radical media workers in advanced capitalist countries establish these connections between different types of oppression and build a theory of mass culture at the same time, they will be making an unique contribution to the theory and practice of revolution worldwide.

Our understanding of cultural institutions and their revolutionary potential changes with the practice of each revolution, and our own too. For example, Latin American revolutionary movements are redefining the possibility for a vital relation between religion and civic life, as the Christian base communities and radical clergy assert the right of the poor to have that power which they need to live just and dignified lives. Such a vision has greatly influenced radical Christians in the United States and provides a powerful antidote here to the alliance of the moral majority and the right. In a similar way, women in the Nicaraguan revolution have made great gains and have influenced militant Salvadoran women not to put off defining and reclaiming women's issues until the revolution has been won. Such lessons from within struggles influence other struggles. Learning to deal with the complex interrelation between class issues and those of gender and race marks our struggle here in the United States. And in JUMP CUT we try to articulate that not just for our movement but for other countries as well.

One of JUMP CUT's most important functions has been to get ideas out in the open so that they will be discussed further. We have striven to be readable by a varied audience and yet not to sacrifice intellectual rigor or political understanding. Yet both the variety of articles found in JUMP CUT and the different tendencies from which the articles come have led to misunderstanding and conflict — with writers, readers, and staff.

We see no easy way to resolve all differences. Our editorial board is diverse and in that way effectively functions for us as a political reference point. Finally, it has been our experience that this diversity is a richness, for in attempting to deal with differences among ourselves and among our readers we have developed better analyses and hopefully learned more equitable ways of working together.

We are getting older and a little slower in putting out issues, but JUMP CUT is in good health, and we look forward to many more years of cultural political struggle.